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### The Free Republican Party in Ahmed Ağaoğlu's Socio-Political Life

*Ahmed Ağaoğlu'nun Sosyo-Politik Hayatında "Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası"nın Yeri*

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#### Özet

Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin ilk kadın avukatı Ahmed Ağaoğlu'nun kızı Süreyya Ağaoğlu, 1975 yılında İstanbul'da yayınlanan "Bir Hayat Böyle Geçti" adlı otobiyografik eserinde anıyor: "1929 yılında Atatürk'ün önderliğinde, Serbest Fırka kuruldu ve babam onun ısrarı üzerine onun saflarına girdi." Bu tarihten itibaren Ahmed Ağaoğlu, muhalefet safında ülkenin sosyo-politik yaşamına katılma konusundaki ilk deneyimine başladı. Ahmed Bey "Serbest Fırka Hatıraları"nda o yıllara ilişkin değerli bilgileri, çoğu zaman herhangi bir resmi belgeye yansımayan özel konuşmaları ve yirminci yüzyılın başlarında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin siyasi hayatını etkileyen kararların hangi koşullar altında alındığını anlatır. Partideki faaliyetleriyle ilgili konuşan Ahmed Bey şunları yazdı: "Muhakkak bildiğim ve asla tereddüt etmediğim bir şey vardır. O da, kendim ve arkadaşlarımdır!" Bu makalede Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası'nın Ahmed Ağaoğlu'nun sosyo-politik hayatındaki yeri, bu partinin faaliyetlerine yaptığı katkılar ve partili meslektaşlarının, örneğin Fethi Okyar, Burhanettin Onat, Celal Bayar ve diğerlerin çeşitli anılarına yansıyan hatıraları araştırılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahmed Bey Ağaoğlu, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, yirminci yüzyıl, siyasi hayat, parti, muhalefet, demokrasi

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**Abstract**

Sureyya Aghaoglu, Ahmed bey Aghaoglu's daughter and the first female lawyer of the Republic of Turkiye, in her autobiographical work "And this is how the life passed" ("Bir 6m6r b6yle ge7ti"), published in Istanbul in 1975, wrote the following statement: "In 1929, the Free Republican Party was founded under the leadership of Atat6rk, and my father became a member of this party at Atat6rk's insistence". It was from this time that the first experience of opposition in the socio-political life of Ahmed bey Aghaoglu began. Ahmed bey's book of memoirs "Memories of The Free Republican Party" ("Serbest Fırka Hatıraları") about those years contains valuable information on private conversations between two people, which are not reflected in any official documents and the conditions under which decisions affecting the political life of the Republic of Turkiye were made at the beginning of the 20th century. Talking about his activities in the party, Ahmed bey wrote: "There was one thing I knew for sure and I never hesitated. It was me and my friends!" The present article deals with the place of the Free Republican Party in the social and political life of Ahmed bey Aghaoglu, his contribution to this party and the attitude shown to him in various memoirs written by party members.

**Keywords:** Ahmed bey Aghaoglu, Republic of Turkiye, 20<sup>th</sup> century, political life, party, opposition, democracy.

## **Introduction**

The establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, which declared its independence in 1923, was considered one of the important episodes among history-changing events in the world history at the beginning of the 20th century. The collapses of several great empires after the First World War, the emergence of new states on those territories, struggles for independence of small nations, emergence of new political ideologies and the big powers' struggle over the sphere of political influence placed great hopes on the state that would be created on the territory of the huge Ottoman Empire. The fragmentation of territory which was a dwelling for more than twenty-two (22) ethnic groups and 45 modern independent states (see Kodaman, 1987), the appropriation of lands and the establishment of small colonies that would serve their own economy in the areas rich in underground and terrestrial resources would have been a great achievement and victory for the powers of that time. However, as a result of the determined and brave struggle of the Turkish nation, the independent Republic of Türkiye was declared on October 29, 1923. This remarkable event is inextricably connected with the name of Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In the 1930s, US Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, who visited Türkiye in order to restore political relations with the newly formed state (see Dilek, 2010), described Atatürk in a very accurate manner: "He was a soldier-statesman, one of the greatest leaders of our era. He ensured that Türkiye got its rightful place among the most advanced nations in the world. He has given to Turks a sense of self-confidence and endurance that forms the foundation stone of a nation's greatness" (aturkscholarship.com.au). Albert Lebrun, who was the president of France in 1932-1940, described his efforts as "the work with intelligent and peaceful methods" which "will mark traces in the history of mankind" (perapalace.com). The words, which are believed to have been said by the Prime Minister of Great Britain, David Lloyd George, "the centuries rarely produce a genius. It is our bad luck that the great genius of our era was granted to the Turkish nation" are a sheer prove that Atatürk was accepted as a genius among world leaders of his time (quotepark.com).

Thus, on October 29, 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was elected the first president of the Republic of Türkiye, with all his strength, inexhaustible energy and genius, dived into the state-building work. The same year he founded the Republican People's Party ("Cumhuriyyet Halk Fırkası") which became the major governing body from 1923 till 1945. Despite the fact that the period between 1923 and 1945 in the history of Türkiye is called the "One-party period" ("Tek partili dönem"), the events happened in those times show that during these 20 years, the head of state, Mustafa Kemal, who chose the path of democracy in the

development of the country, took active part in the creation of one of the pillars of democratic regime - political opposition. On his initiative a year after the declaration of the republic in 1924 the first opposition party under the name “Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası” - “Progressive Republican Party” was established. However, after the Sheikh Said rebellion, which began in February 1925, the Party was dissolved (Ertem, 2010: 71) and the next five years passed under the rule of a single political party. This situation worried Atatürk very much. In one of conversations recorded in his close comrade-in-arms the ambassador of the state in France Ali Fathi Okyar's memoirs Gazi complained to Okyar: “The German writer Emil Ludwig visited Ankara last year and asked me strange questions about our administration. He came to the conclusion that we are a dictatorship. He wrote this down exactly this way. But I did not establish the republic for my own personal benefit. We are all mortal. The institution that will remain behind me after my death is the institution of tyranny and I don't want to go down in history as one who's legacy to the nation is an institution of oppression” (Okyar, 2019: 19). In August 1930, Okyar, who came to Türkiye from France for summer vacation, was called to Atatürk and offered to lead the newly formed opposition “Free Party” (“Serbest Fırka”). Thus, on August 12, 1930, a new democratic liberal party - the Free Republican Party (“Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası”) was created.

In his report to Atatürk in 1926 Ahmed Aghaoglu expresses his position on the current political situation in the state, saying that the dismantled principles condemned “the rotten” state to collapse. It was necessary to throw these away and replace them with new lively and fresh principles in order to revitalize the state: “However, along with this it should be stated that new principles are not completely formed and placed. So, now we are in possession of a state with no old and still incomplete new principles” (Ağaoğlu, 2021: 141). The only way to fix the situation A.Aghaoglu saw in hardwork and dedication to aim. For that “self-abstinence”, “mutual control” and hard work were shown as the main tools. However, when the offer to join the new Free Republican Party came to A.Aghaoglu, his reluctance showed itself, but it has a solid ground of beliefs under.

## **1. Ahmed Bey Aghaoglu And The Free Republican Party**

After the establishment of the opposition party the question of membership became the most acute. It should be noted that the first members and founders of the Free Republican Party, such as deputy Nuri Jonker, Kars deputy Ahmed Aghaoglu, Aydin deputy Rashid Galib, Erzurum deputy Tahsin Uzer and even Atatürk's sister Magbula Khanum (see Şarman, 2016: 85) joined this political “experiment” at Atatürk's insistence. Ahmed bey Aghaoglu was one of

the significant figures in Atatürk times, a statesman, journalist, lawyer, ideologist of Turkic world and the first head of the board of the Anadolu Agency. His daughter Sureyya Aghaoglu, the first female lawyer of the Republic of Türkiye, in her autobiographical work “And this is how the life passed” (“Bir ömür böyle geçti”), published in Istanbul in 1975, witnesses: “The Free Republican Party was founded in 1929 under the leadership of Atatürk and my father became a member of this party at his insistence” (Ağaoğlu S., 1975: 58). The primary reason why MPs were reluctant about the creation of a new party opposing the ruling People's Party was hidden in their exceptional loyalty to the state leader, that is, they considered opposition to the People's Party as opposition personally to Atatürk, the head of the party and to his political views. For this reason, only with Gazi's insistence and coercion members began to enroll in the new party. Looking through the list of the party members, it is easy to notice that the vast majority of them are the former members of the People's Party. In his “Memories of the Free Republican Party” (“Serbest Fırka Hatıraları”), Ahmed bey explained his first objections to the creation of the party in following words: “After the documents were read, Gazi asked, “What do you say?”. Since no one answered, he turned to me and said, “Professor! What are you saying about this?” I replied, that “this feels a little bit artificial” (Ağaoğlu, 2021: 35). According to Ahmed bey, in the mentioned period, on the one hand, there was a party that had all the state facilities in its possession, was in power for years and was led by the founder of the state, and on the other hand, there was a new party that did not have any means, is opposing the People's Party and is led by the former French ambassador, who was little known by the masses. Therefore, none of the public and socio-political figures left to make a choice would ever choose the new party. “You choose!” - “I won't choose!” - “Why?” - “I will not leave you!” - Aghaoglu answered Atatürk (see Ağaoğlu, 2021: 35-40). However, over time, Ahmed bey's participation in every meeting, debates and discussions on the party's structure were made mandatory and the head of state used to ask for his opinion or analysis at every opportunity. Gaziantep MP Suleyman Asaf Amrullah bey, known as Kılıç Ali, recalled that during a ball, Atatürk called Ahmed bey Aghaoglu, showed him the program of the new party he had decided on, and asked Ahmed bey's evaluation: “I guess it was from this very night when Ahmed bey joined the Free Republican Party” (Naskali, 2015: 85).

Being known for his sincerity in openly expressing the opinion Ahmed bey was given the following characteristics by the Prime Minister of that time Ismet Inonu: “I know Ahmed bey well. His whole concern was to see that every side of any work was brought into safety. Whether in the corridors of the Assembly or in the columns of newspapers, he was always complaining that things were not going well...he is a dreamy idealist” (see Okyar, 1980: 435-

443). All Ahmed bey Aghaoglu's critical articles can be found published in the pages of "Yarin", "Son Posta" and "Jumhuriyet" newspapers. His articles were always met with a great response among society and his new party comrades. Even Jelal Bayar, who is considered one of the founders of the Republic of Turkiye, the founder of the Democratic Party, the last prime minister of the Atatürk era and later the third president of the Republic of Turkiye, considered Ahmed bey the "strongest man in terms of opinion and expression" in the Free Republican Party (see Okyar, 1980: 100-103), valued his ideas and appreciated his efforts. Doctor Burhaneddin Onat, head of the Antalya branch of the Free Party, former Antalya deputy of the Democratic Party, also mentioned Ahmed bey in his memoirs with great respect and warmth: "One morning we left the port on the Konya ship. Fathi bey was accompanied by Tahsin bey and Aghaoglu Ahmed. We always gathered at the same table for dinner...I did not see Fathi bey's political experience and ideas to the extent I expected. He appeared to me a little bit naïve and capricious...but Aghaoglu Ahmed was not like him. Possessing a very high intellect, culture, iron will, pure spirit, high patriotism and love for the nation, he made me his fan from the first days of "Turkish Hearth". Here he always listens to what is being said without interrupting, answers very few, and seems to have considered very few worthy of reply. Aghaoglu was thoughtful" (Okyar, 1980: 27). Fathi Okyar and Atatürk, who knew these traits of Ahmed bey's character, made him write the political program of the Free Republican Party. The first program was broadcast by Anadolu Agency after it was discussed and approved by the head of state. However, later the necessity to expand it made them give it to Ahmed bey again, what he immediately executed in more detailed manner. The program he wrote later "formed the basis of the faction's political activities" (Okyar, 1997: 72). Thus, Ahmed bey Aghaoglu becomes one of the most active members of the party.

After the Free Republican Party was completely established and announced, the first thing the members did was to organize trips to Anatolia to attract people and start all organizing works. Starting from Izmir, it was decided to visit Aydın, Manisa, Balıkesir and on. Naturally, Ahmed bey Aghaoglu was sent along with Fathi bey. The first destination was Izmir.

Since the emergence and in the short three-month life of the party the Izmir events occupy the most significant place. The riots that took place there were a sort of indicator of the real political situation in the country. These events revealed a key issue: the administration of the People's Party was no longer popular, so support for the newly formed party was constantly increasing. This meant that during the next elections, the young Free Party could come to power. A behind-the-scenes of the events that took place in Izmir were described by Ahmed bey Aghaoglu in his book of memoirs in the chapter named "Izmir Events" (see Ağaoğlu, 2021: 55-

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68). Izmir, according to A.Aghaoglu, was a special place in the state, full of intellectuals, printing press, the place where “Turkism is in its most ardent form” (Ağaoğlu, 2021: 55). So the riots there could greatly influence the whole nation, and decisions made there could change the political scene of the state. Such a situation in the country’s political life scared not only the members of the People’s Party, but also the members of the Free Republican Party itself. As mentioned earlier, no one wanted to oppose the party led by Atatürk out of great respect and love for him. This great success of the Free Party among the people was actually unexpected for everyone, what consequently led to various attacks on the party and its members.

## **2. Ahmed Bey Aghaoglu’s Ideas Over the Free Republican Party**

On October 19, 1930, in “Son Posta” newspaper, Ahmed bey Aghaoglu wrote the following in response to the criticism by journalist Jalal Nuri: “I fight hard with myself not to get involved in the violent attacks. But sometimes when these attacks become unstoppable, all endurance and patience run out and the need to show arrogant people of their position comes before all patience and endurance” (see Ağaoğlu, 1930). One of the attackers, Yunus Nadi, the founder of “Jumhuriyet” newspaper, in one of his articles notes that opinions expressed in Ahmed bey’s article written six years ago on the political situation, where he demonstrates his absolute loyalty to the head of state and his political direction have changed a lot during these years. Yunus bey was wondering if the main goal was to provide human liberties and control for their execution, it was possible to do even with a one party rule. Ahmed bey’s respond was: “The explanation I provided you with earlier prove that these changes do not exist” (see Ağaoğlu, 1930, 18.10). A. Aghaoglu was still loyal to Atatürk’s principles, however he believed as many examples in the world including their own state show that ruling with one political party does not provide fair control, and the principle of “mutual control” works better with more than one party. However, Yunus bey, who was not satisfied with this, continued to severely criticize the Free Republican Party and its members. “He says that there was anarchy in the country! The cause of this anarchy was the Free Party! The allegation is rotten in its core; it is a lie. There is no anarchy in the country! The whole country, the whole nation has gathered around its great leaders and is following them” (see Ağaoğlu, 1930, 11.10). Accusations about the new faction, Izmir events, Fathi Okyar and other members, large crowds gathered almost everywhere the party’s MPs went, divided the country into two camps and created new controversies. Seeing the division of the country, Atatürk and Fathi bey decided to dissolve the Free Republican Party. On November 17, 1930, the Free Republican Party ceased to exist.

In January 1931, Ahmed bey Aghaoglu published an article entitled “1930 Account” in

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“Son Posta” newspaper (see Ağaoğlu, 2021: 225-227). In this article, while taking stock of the past year, he states that the establishment of the Free Republican Party was nearly the most important event of 1930. The reason for this was Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s belief that a multi-party administration is more appropriate than a one-party administration to manage the secular democratic country he wanted to create. “This nationalist, republican and secular” (Ağaoğlu, 2021: 225) party was welcomed from the very first day of its creation. However, after a while it was drowned into a great wave of hostility and hatred from all sides. Talking about his activities in the party, Ahmed bey wrote: “There was one thing I knew for sure and I never hesitated. It was me and my comrades!” (Ağaoğlu, 2021: 226). The people who fully believed in the principles of the party they created tried to implement these principles with all their heart, and were eager to find a solution to the situation in the country. Ahmet bey Aghaoglu, who was highly valued by his party comrades, was at the forefront of this initiative. After the party was dissolved A.Aghaoglu did not continue his political career, moved to Istanbul and started teaching in Law Faculty of Istanbul University. However he never stopped his oppositional activities. In 1933 he established an oppositional newspaper “Akın” where he continued criticizing the government.

### **Conclusion**

The place of the Free Republican Party in Ahmed Aghaoglu’s social-political life is hard to be determined categorically as short only three month life of this party had not got enough time to influence it dramatically. However, the events A.Aghaoglu witnessed during his political tour with the party members turned for him into an impetus to start criticizing an existing political regime more openly and according to some researchers of his life and legacy it was the time when he revealed his affiliation to a “liberal” camp the most. Being “forced” to join the Free Republican Party in short time he became an author of its political program: his opinion was highly valued, the amendments he offered were carefully discussed and he was always invited and taken to the most important meetings with people propagandizing for the new party. The social-political scene in the provinces, the sufferings people tell them about and people’s willingness to join their party made A.Aghaoglu to write critical articles on behalf of these people about changes which should happen in the state rule. These articles create a rich journalistic heritage of A. Aghaoglu’s works, which allow us to study his thoughts and position on certain social-political problems of the time. What should be also mentioned is that his articles criticizing People’s Party created for him a number of enemies, who will attack him on the pages of several newspapers. Strongly believing in the principles of the Party A.Aghaoglu always tried to explain that the opposition they support is not against the leader or state, but



those injustices existing at places and fixing those problems will only bring prosperity and benefits to the state. However, the accusations in causing the anarchy and terror turned out to be too hard for the Party and in October 1930 the Free Republican Party was dissolved.

A.Aghaoglu's experience in the oppositional party also shaped his further life, when he continued to create critical content about the rule of one-party regime on the pages of "Akin" newspaper of which he was an editor-in-chief, although he never returns to politics and continues his life for some time as a professor in Law Faculty of Istanbul University. On the dissolution of the Party he used to say that the only issue he never doubted about was his and his comrades' belief that the Party was created for good, and it was a great pity, that the wave of pressure swallowed them and their good intentions.

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