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Turkish Party's Pick for President Worries Secularists

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ISTANBUL, April 24 — Turkey's majority political party today chose a prominent leader with an Islamic background to compete for the presidency, a move expected to extend the party's reach into the heart of Turkey's secular establishment — and boost a new class of self-described Muslim moderates — for the first time in this country's history.

The choice of Abdullah Gul, 56, the affable, English-speaking foreign minister who is Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan's](#) closest political ally, is expected to be confirmed by parliament in several rounds of voting that begin on Friday.

Turkey is a Muslim country, but its state, set up in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, is strictly secular, and the presidency is its most important office. The selection of Mr. Gul, whose wife wears a head scarf, is not likely to sit well with secular Turks, some of whom worry that their lifestyles — drinking alcohol, wearing miniskirts, and swimming in co-ed pools — could eventually be in danger.

Mr. Gul, an agile reformer who has long been his party's public face abroad, nodded to those concerns in a press conference in Ankara after his nomination today, saying, "Our differences are our richness." His candidacy was a minor concession. The choice most distasteful to the secular establishment was Mr. Erdogan himself, who deftly bowed out.

Still, if Mr. Gul is confirmed, his party would occupy the posts of president, prime minister and parliamentary speaker, a line-up that opposition party leader, Deniz Baykal, called "unfavorable."

"This picture would not match with the realities and needs of Turkey," he said.

The party Mr. Gul helped found, known by its Turkish initials, AK, sprang from Turkey's political Islamic movements of the 1990's, but it moderated significantly after coming to power on a national scale in 2002. Since then, it has applied pragmatic policies that helped create an unprecedented economic boom and opened up the state in ways that the rigid secular elite had never imagined, in part to qualify it for membership of the [European Union](#).

"This party has done more for the modernization of Turkey than all the secular parties in the previous years," said Joost Lagendijk, chairman of the Turkey delegation of the [European Parliament](#). "They were willing to open up the system, to challenge the elite."

Although the party is publicly adamant about religion not entering policy, bristling at shorthand descriptions of it as pro-Islamic, it draws much of its support from Turkey's religiously conservative heartland.

Once on the periphery, these traditional Turks are now emerging into mainstream society as a powerful middle class that has driven Turkey's economic boom. They are also beginning to press Turkey's long-ruling elite for change.

"These are the new forces, the new social powers," said Ali Bulac, a columnist for a conservative, mainstream newspaper in Istanbul. "They are very devout. They don't drink. They don't gamble. They don't take holidays."

"They are loaded with a huge energy," he added. "This energy has been blocked by the state."

That energy has helped drive a spectacular economic boom in Turkey. In the country's two largest cities, progress dazzles. Shiny new fuel-efficient taxis zip down tulip-lined streets. New parks have opened. The air is no longer polluted. The economy has doubled in size in the four years since the AK party came to power, a growth spurt that was kept on track by its strict adherence to an economic program prescribed by the [International Monetary Fund](#).

"Socially pious administrations both locally and centrally have made enormous progress for the modernization of the country,"

said Omer Bolat, director of Musiad, the business association that represents the new class. "Unfortunately the secular circles are very much for status quo."

The growth has drawn more observant Turks out of their homes into public life. The city pool and gym in the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Okmeydani is a testament to the ascendancy of the pious middle class in Turkey. Few observant women attended in 1996 when the pool opened, an attendant said. Now they fill treadmills and lap lanes.

Dondu Koc, 46, pedaled an exercise bike in a room of women last Wednesday.

"I always wanted to but there were no places to go," she said, small beads of sweat on her forehead. Before Mr. Erdogan's stewardship as mayor of the city, there was only one public pool. Now there are three and another five under construction.

The city gym and pool are separated by sex, an arrangement Ms. Koc likes because it lets her and other covered women to pedal, jog and swim without their veils. But the division irritates secular Turks who see it as an infringement on their own lifestyle preferences.

"There shouldn't be a split like this," said a woman whose hair was still wet from her swim. "We sit next to each other; we should swim next to each other too."

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