



Presidential Pick in Turkey Is Sign of a Rising Islamic Middle Class



Johan Spanner for The New York Times

A poster of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan dominated an AK party rally in Istanbul on Sunday.

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ISTANBUL, April 24 — Turkey’s ruling party on Tuesday chose a presidential candidate with an Islamic background, a move that will extend the reach of the party — and the emerging class of devout Muslims it represents — into the heart of Turkey’s secular establishment for the first time.



Associated Press

Abdullah Gul with his wife, Hayrunisa, in 2005. His candidacy reflects the secular-religious debate.

The selection has focused the worries of secular Turks who fear that sexual equality, as well as drinking alcohol and wearing miniskirts, could eventually be in danger.

Abdullah Gul, 56, the foreign minister, whose wife wears a Muslim head scarf and who is Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)’s closest political ally, is expected to be confirmed as president by Parliament in several rounds of voting that begin Friday. That will boost Turkey’s new political class — modernizers from a religious background.

“These are the new forces, the new social powers,” said Ali Bulac, a columnist for a conservative newspaper, Zaman, 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. This energy has been blocked by the state.”

Turkey is a Muslim country, but its state, founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, is

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strictly secular, and the presidency is its most important office. The current president is Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a secularist with a judicial background whose term is expiring.

Mr. Gul, an affable English speaker who has long been his party's public face abroad, nodded to secular concerns in a news conference in Ankara after his nomination, saying, "Our differences are our richness." His candidacy was a 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 lineup that the opposition party leader, Deniz Baykal, called "unfavorable." His party later announced that it would boycott the vote.

In the Middle East, where mixing religion with government has been seen as poisonous for modernity, Turkey's very light blend stands out as unusual, even unique.

"This party has done more for the modernization of Turkey than all the secular parties in the previous years," said Joost Lagendijk, a member of the [European Parliament](#) who heads a committee on Turkish issues. "They were willing to open up the system, to challenge the elite."

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

Although the party is publicly adamant about keeping religion separate from 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 as a powerful middle class that has driven Turkey's boom. The economy has nearly doubled in the four years that the AK has been in power, largely because it has stuck to an economic program prescribed by the [International Monetary Fund](#).

Mr. Gul's candidacy goes to the heart of the secular-religious debate, because the presidency is such a revered symbol with real powers — he is commander in chief and has a veto. Turkish military leaders in the past have remarked that they would refuse to visit the presidential palace if a woman in a head scarf were living in it.

"How can she now become the host of a palace that represents the very same principles?" said Necmi Yuzbasioglu, a professor of constitutional law at Istanbul University.

Mehmet A. Kislali, a columnist with the newspaper Radikal, who has contacts with the military, said: "The military should not be underestimated. Thousands of officers are watching the developments."

But the party's only real application of Islam has been its grass-roots approach. In practices that would be familiar to Shiite Muslims in Lebanon or to Palestinians in Gaza, women's groups go door to door offering aid, community centers offer women's literacy classes and sports centers give free physical therapy to handicapped children.

The question of religion aside, economic progress under the AK has been extraordinary, with a steady rise in entrepreneurship. In Istanbul, fuel-efficient taxis zip down tulip-lined streets. New parks have sprung up. The air is less polluted.

Mustafa Karaduman, a textile designer and fashion house owner, is among the new entrepreneurs. He is from Anatolia, a capital of middle-class production, and the homeland of Mr. Gul. His fashion house has turned into an empire, supplying Islamic clothing for women in Europe and the Middle East. He is 50, has seven children, and is an outspoken opponent of the miniskirt.

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“My mission,” he says, “is to cover all women around the world.”

The country’s wealth has drawn more observant Turks into public life. Some religious schools now teach English, unheard of a decade ago, improving the chances of students from religious backgrounds on university entrance exams.

At the Kartal Anadolu Imam Hatip High School in a conservative middle-class neighborhood, 16-year-old girls in head scarves and sweatshirts played basketball last week in brightly patterned Converse sneakers. (Skulls were a popular choice.) Last year, 94 students were admitted to universities, up from almost none a decade ago, said Hadir Kalkan, the school’s principal, pointing to students’ career choices in marketing, broadcasting, psychology and finance. Just 14 chose to continue religious training.

The city pool and gym in the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Okmeydani is a testament to the ascendancy of the pious middle class. Few observant women attended in 1996, when the pool opened, an attendant said. Now they fill treadmills and lap lanes.

“I always wanted to but there were no places to go,” said Dondu Koc, a 46-year-old in yellow sweat pants as she pedaled an exercise bike in a room full of women on Wednesday. Before Mr. Erdogan’s stewardship as mayor of the city, there was only one public pool. Now there are three, and five are under construction.

The complex is separated by sex, an arrangement Ms. Koc likes because it lets her and other covered women pedal, jog and swim without their head scarves. But the division irritates secular Turks.

“There shouldn’t be a split like this,” said Tamis Demirel, 47, a homemaker whose hair was still wet from her swim. “We sit next to each other; we should swim next to each other, too.”

The remark seemed to answer the question of Elif Demir, a 19-year-old office clerk at a youth rally for Mr. Erdogan on Sunday. “We have no problem with women wearing miniskirts,” she said, “but why are they so bothered with our head scarves?”

That frustration took the form of a public scolding at a meeting on the far edge of Istanbul on Friday night, where a man who supports Mr. Erdogan’s party complained about what he said was weak party support for religious schools.

“What about Koran courses?” he asked a party representative. “We are looking for generations that have morality.”

The apartment where the meeting took place bore the traces of upper-middle-class life: a running machine, a washing machine and a dryer. Brightly colored scarves covered the hair of the hostesses.

The representative, Kenan Danisman, paused as the evening prayer began. He then offered some pragmatic advice. “If you transfer this prayer into practical support, in three to five years, the problems that hurt peoples’ consciences will be resolved.”

It is precisely the open question of religion’s role in society that makes secular Turks so uncomfortable. Mr. Erdogan may be explicit in his opposition to Islam’s entering policy, but what about the rank and file who are filling jobs in public administration — what is their view of sexual equality? Secular Turks worry that their conservative worldview will lead to a reinterpretation of the rules and lower tolerance for a secular lifestyle.

“People like me are not calculating the economy or what sort of policies they are making,” said Basak Caglayan, 35, a financial consultant who will be married next month. “The life we expect, we want, for our children, is changing. I worry about that.”

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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