



Turkish City Counters Fear of Islam's Reach

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Johan Spanner for The New York Times

A young woman in a traditional black carsaf waited for the call to midday prayer on Friday outside the Mevlana Mosque in central Konya.

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)
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KONYA, Turkey, May 12 — In the not too distant past here in Turkey's religious heartland, women would not appear in public unless they were modestly dressed, a single woman was not able to rent an apartment on her own, and the mayor proposed segregating city buses by sex.

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Johann Spanner for The New York Times
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Fears of such restrictions, inflamed by secularist politicians, have led thousands of Turks to march in major cities in the past month. A political party with a past in Islamic politics led by Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) has tried to capture the country's highest secular post.

Once it succeeds, the secularists' argument goes, Turkey will be dragged back to an earlier era when Islam ran the state. [Another march drew a million people in Izmir on Sunday.]

But here in Konya, a leafy city on the plains of central Turkey, Mr. Erdogan's party has done no such thing. In the paradox of modern Turkey, the party here has had a moderating influence, helping to open a guarded society and make it more flexible.

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often build mosques for their workers. This one is under construction for a company called Molinos.

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Johan Spanner for The New York Times
Suleyman Okudan, left, the rector of Selcuk University, and Kursat Turgut, a former veterinarian in charge of student affairs at the university.



Konya, on the central plain, is in the religious heartland of Turkey.

Konya is still deeply attached to its faith. Mosques are spread thickly throughout the city; there are as many as in Istanbul, which has five times the population. But in a part of the world where religion and politics have been a poisonous mix and cultural norms are conservative regardless of religion, it is an oasis: women here wear relatively revealing clothing, couples hold hands and bus segregation is a distant memory.

“We’ve been wearing the same dress for 80 years, and it doesn’t fit anymore,” said Yoruk Kurtaran, who travels extensively in Turkey. “Things used to be black and white.”

Now, he said, “there are a lot of grays.”

The shift shows the evolution of Turkey’s Islamic movement, which has matured under Mr. Erdogan, abandoning the restrictive practices of its predecessors and demonstrating to its observant constituents the benefits of belonging to the [European Union](#).

It also follows a pattern occurring throughout Turkey, where the secularists who founded the state out of the Ottoman Empire’s remains are now lagging behind religious Turks in efforts to modernize it. But secular Turks, like those who took part in the recent protests, do not believe that Mr. Erdogan and his allies have changed.

The mayor who proposed segregation, for example, is now part of Mr. Erdogan’s party. The protesters argue that the party may say it wants more religious freedom for its constituents, for example allowing observant women to wear their head scarves in universities, but it has never laid out its vision for how to protect secular lifestyles.

Mr. Erdogan’s party has been the most flexible and open of all parties that consider Islam an important part of Turkish society. Its politics have so far been respectful of secular freedom in most cases. But there are harder-line members who would like to see a more religious society, and secular Turks fear that highly personal questions like their children’s education and rights for unmarried women could be threatened.

In the country as a whole, religious Turks have felt like second-class citizens for generations, in part a legacy of Ataturk’s radical, secular revolution in the early 20th century. Now, elevated by a decade of economic growth, they are pressing for a bigger share of power.

In Konya some of the change started from the top. In 2003, around the time Mr. Erdogan’s party came to power, an irreverent ophthalmologist and a veterinarian with long hair were appointed to run Selcuk University in Konya. They immediately began challenging the sensibilities of this conservative city, organizing concerts and encouraging student clubs.

Kursat Turgut, the veterinarian, who became vice rector, said he had been confronted by a group of students who went to his office and demanded that he cancel a concert because they did not like the singer. He refused.

“Change is the most difficult thing,” Mr. Turgut said, sitting in the rector’s office, where paintings lined the walls. “It takes time to change a mentality.”

The students were from a nationalist group with an Islamic tinge that for years had used scare tactics to enforce a strict moral code on campus. When Umit, who did not want to give his last name, started at the university’s veterinary school five years ago he was chastised by students from the group for cuddling with his girlfriend and, on another

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occasion, for wearing shorts.

"They thought they were protecting honor and morals," said Aliye Cetinkaya, a journalist who moved here 12 years ago for college. "If we crossed the line there was a fight."

Mr. Turgut and the rector, Suleyman Okudan, shut down the group's activities. Now, four years later, there are more than 80 student clubs, students like Umit behave and dress any way they choose, and Mr. Turgut's concerts, open to the public, draw large crowds.

"It is like a different century," Ms. Cetinkaya said.

She still faces limitations. When she covered a demonstration in Konya early last year against the Muhammad cartoons published in Denmark, stones and shoes were thrown at her because she was not wearing a scarf. But such incidents are rare, and far outweighed by improvements. For example, there were only about 50 women in the two-year degree program she attended a decade ago. Now the number is above 1,000, she said.

The deep-rooted religiosity in Konya found public expression in politics in the late 1980s, when the city became one of the first in the country to elect a pro-Islamic party — the Welfare Party of [Necmettin Erbakan](#), the grandfather of the Turkish Islamic movement — to run the city. Mr. Erbakan himself was elected to Parliament from Konya.

The administration was restrictive: it was a Welfare Party mayor, Halil Urun, who proposed, unsuccessfully, segregating the buses in 1989. But the city kept electing the party until the late 1990s, when it was shut down by the state establishment for straying from secularism.

Then, in 2000, a young member of the banned party, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, began the Justice and Development Party. Mr. Erdogan had made a concerted effort to take Islam out of politics altogether — aware that continuing to push religion would lead to the same end — and it was unclear whether Konya voters would accept it.

They did. Of the 32 members of the City Council, all but two are now members of Mr. Erdogan's party.

It was economics that convinced Ahmet Agirbasli, 57, a businessman who sells car parts and pasta. When he was younger he did not shake hands with women. For years he voted for Mr. Erbakan's party. He did not believe that Turkey's future was with Europe, but he changed his mind after Mr. Erdogan's party began reforms with the intention of joining the European Union, and his business began to grow.

"Erbakan didn't have an open mind," Mr. Agirbasli said, eating a club sandwich in a hotel restaurant. "He didn't believe the country needed links with the rest of the world."

Now he sells macaroni to 50 countries. Five years ago he sold to only 10.

Akif Emre, a columnist at *Yeni Safak*, a conservative newspaper in Istanbul, argues that Mr. Erdogan has helped to bridge the gap between Turkey's religious heartland and urban, secular Turks.

"They really accept secularism," he said of Mr. Erdogan and his allies. "They are changing the mentality. Conservative people changed their lifestyle toward a more secular way."

Religious Turks, for their part, still harbor an unspoken wariness of the state. New civil organizations are more focused on building mosques than engaging in public debate, and people scrupulously avoid talking about politics.

Religious extremists have been found on the fringes. In January the authorities arrested a man they said was the leader of [Al Qaeda](#) in Turkey, and in 2000 a pile of bodies that showed signs of torture was found buried under a villa rented by a homegrown Islamist group called [Hezbollah](#).

"Konya is one of the main hubs of traditional and conservative, anti-Ankara countryside,"

said Ersin Kalaycioglu, a professor of political science at Isik University in Istanbul. "It has a structure that takes religion very seriously and formulates social life around it."

Rahmi Bastoklu, the leader in Konya of the secularist Republican People's Party and the only one of the Konya district's 16 members of Parliament who is not from Mr. Erdogan's party, put it bluntly: "People have to leave Konya to enjoy themselves."

But an unspoken understanding between Konya's religious Turks and the secular state is in place, in which the mosques are left alone, but religious Turks do not press too many demands on the state. The balance is often held steady by Mr. Erdogan's party.

Still, pushing too hard against the secular establishment might mean the loss of recent gains. "It's not a useful thing to talk about," said Ilhan Cumrali, 36, sitting in his clothing store among racks of floor-length skirts. "We are trying to find the right path. If we do it too aggressively there will be a negative reaction."

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting from Istanbul.

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