

A Secular Turkish City Feels Islam's Pulse Beating Stronger, Causing Divisions

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Turkish women waited at a bus stop in Denizli.

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**
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DENIZLI, Turkey — The little red prayer book was handed out in a public primary school here in western Turkey in early May. It was small enough to fit in a pocket, but it carried a big message: Pray in the Muslim way. Get others to pray, too.

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

In the village of Nikfer, Turkish students raced in front of a public school where an Islamic singing performance was held.

"The message was clear to me," said a retired civil servant, whose 13-year-old son, a student at the Yesilkoy Ibrahim Cengiz school, received the book. "This is not something that should be distributed in schools."

This leafy, liberal city would seem like one of the least likely places to allow Islam to permeate public life. But for some residents, the book is part of a subtle shift toward increasingly public religiosity that has gone hand in hand with the ascent of the party of Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#). The phenomenon is complex. The party has not ordered changes, but sets examples through a growing network of observant Muslim teachers and public servants hired since it came to power in 2002.

The shift goes to the heart of the question that has gripped this country for the past two months: As the party settles more deeply into the bureaucracy, will it leave its Islamic roots in the past and build a future that includes secular Turks, or will it impose its religion more rigorously?

The answer is as complex as Turkey itself. In more religious Turkish cities, the party has had a moderating influence, persuading deeply conservative residents to

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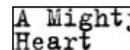
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In secular Denizli, a girl tried on a dress for relatives.

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An Islamic prayer book was displayed.

support the [European Union](#). But here in Denizli, a city located closer to Greece than to Iran, which never voted for pro-Islamic parties before Mr. Erdogan's, the party's new recruits seem to be laying the groundwork for a more pious society.

Mayor Nihat Zeybekci, a charismatic businessman and a member of Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, strongly disputes claims that the party has limited freedoms. Alcohol is still sold near mosques. His party has women in the local government, while the opposition parties do not. "I get offended when a lady says to me, 'When you have absolute control, will I still be able to swim at the beach?'" he said. "It's like asking if I'm a thief."

But secular residents say that they see changes and that they are the inevitable outcome of several decades of economic transformation.

"In a very quiet, deep way, you can sense an Islamization," said Bedrettin Usanmaz, a jewelry shop owner in Denizli. "They're not after rapid change. They're investing for 50 years ahead."

At the heart of the issue is a debate about the fundamental nature of Islam and its role in building an equitable society. Turks like Mr. Zeybekci contend that their country has come a long way since Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's secular revolution in 1923, and that it no longer needs to enforce controls like preventing women from wearing head scarves in public buildings. "It's like locking everybody in a stadium, when you know that only three are thieves," Mr. Zeybekci said, in his office, which has pictures of Mr. Erdogan and Ataturk.

But secular Turks contend that Islam will always seek more space in people's lives, and therefore should be reined in. They look to the military as secularism's final defender.

"Islam is not like other religions," said Kadim Yildirim, a history teacher in Denizli from an opposition labor union. "It influences every part of your life, even your bedroom."

Mr. Yildirim is among a group of teachers here who say they are concerned that the new teachers hired in recent years, often from conservative backgrounds, are changing the education system.

In April, the Education Ministry relaxed requirements for appointing new school principals. The ministry's decision was later annulled after legal action by other labor unions, but in the brief period it was in effect approximately 4,500 people in 40 cities across Turkey were appointed as principals and deputy principals, two thirds of them affiliated with Mr. Erdogan's party, according to an analysis by Egitim-Sen, an opposition education labor union.

According to a report to Parliament by the education minister, 836 people from the government's Religious Affairs Directorate have been transferred to the ministry's offices during Mr. Erdogan's tenure. That has also led to changes in the habits of the bureaucracy. In Denizli, the lunchroom in the local Ministry of Education no longer serves food during Ramadan, based on an assumption that all workers are observing the

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religious fast, employees said.

Staff changes are a feature of any change in government administration. But in Denizli, as in other more secular Turkish cities, the shift is potentially society-changing. Most of the new workers are from an entirely different social class, having come to the city from the surrounding towns and villages to work in textile mills that started in the 1980s. In 40 years, Denizli's population has grown tenfold, Mr. Zeybekci said.

"They are coming to power and it scares the hell out of the established elite," said Baskin Oran, a professor of international relations at Ankara University. The two groups "have nothing in common — try to find a similarity."

The mixing has caused friction, which in Denizli, burst into view this spring, when the Turkish military, the backbone of the secular elite, publicly warned the local government that it had strayed too far from secularism. Its sins? Organizing an Islamic singing performance of schoolgirls in full head scarves and allowing a women's religious study group in a public school in the village of Nikfer, south of Denizli.

For Mr. Zeybekci, the transgressions were so minor that the rebuke had to have been about power, not religion. The military was trying to remain relevant, he said. "They are very aware of what kind of power they are going to lose," he said.

But power has already changed substantially under Mr. Erdogan's party, despite attempts by the secular establishment to stop it. Candidates for government positions who were vetoed by the president have continued in the prospective positions as "substitutes," including the chief of the public television and radio entity, the Education Ministry director in the city of Izmir, and the director of research and training at the Ministry of Culture. In the Education Ministry alone, 536 people are working without approval, according to the minister.

In Nikfer, the principal who allowed the religious study group was a religion teacher. He has since been transferred to another town, a punishment that troubled Asiye Sozeri, a 33-year-old homemaker there, she said. Since the principal was tutoring her daughter and other students on the side, they are now out of luck.

Koran classes in Nikfer have proliferated in recent years, Ms. Sozeri said, but far from being politics-related, the reason can be found in the deteriorating state of farming.

"They say doomsday is nearing," she said, sitting near a window with a patchwork of newly planted tobacco fields unfolding outside. "People see their crops are worse. I guess they want to feel closer to God. When they read the Koran, they feel protected."

In Denizli, as villagers migrated to the city to work, they tried to put their children in its schools, which were far better than rural ones. Many were forced to live in places too small or chaotic to accommodate their children, and as a result, the student hostel became a central feature of city life. Often supported by donations from religious groups, the hostels were places where poor students lived and studied, but had religious undertones: chaperones, often religious college-age Turks, were the role models. "Education is where the religious communities concentrate their efforts," said Gulay Keysan, 31, an English teacher in Denizli. In a school in the city's Karaman district where she taught several years ago, a quarter of her students lived in hostels.

Perhaps the most sensitive point for teachers like Mr. Yildirim are the changes they say are occurring in textbooks. Changes were already under way, part of an upgrade needed to join the European Union, but some officials say that as the nationalism is taken out, a new conservatism is being put in. One of the country's primary eighth-grade science books, for example, "Science Knowledge," has lost its detailed description of Darwin's theory of natural selection and gained a reference to a theory that holds that living beings did not evolve but came into being exactly as they are today, attributed to several ancient Asian scholars. The reference was not there before, nor was the word Islamic to describe the originators of the theory.

"We're talking about fine tuning," Mr. Yildirim said. "This is, after all, a process that Turkey is going through."

All education material, once vetted centrally, is now checked in a far looser fashion, according to one senior Ministry of Education official in Ankara, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was afraid for his job. A point system to rate textbooks has been loosened. The red prayer book, illustrated with pictures of small children praying, would probably not have been distributed in past years.

It is still unclear where today's changes will lead the country. Mr. Oran says that although the ideology of Mr. Erdogan and his allies "is inevitably Islam," they are workers and tradesmen who are ultimately motivated by profit. "They are very rapidly becoming bourgeois."

Mr. Yildirim draws hope from a recent exchange among his students he overheard. One posed a question: If you were rowing a boat with only one extra seat and passed by a deserted island with the Prophet Muhammad and Ataturk, whom would you save?

Another answered: "Ataturk is resourceful. He can save himself. Take Muhammad."

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting from Denizli and Istanbul.

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