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## Alliances Shift as Turks Weigh a Political Turn

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ISTANBUL, July 19 — For 84 years, modern Turkey has been defined by a holy trinity — the army, the republic and its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Each was linked inextricably to the others and all were beyond reproach.

But a deep transformation is under way in this nation of 73 million, and elections this Sunday may prove a watershed: liberal Turks, once supporters of the ruling secular elite and its main backer, the military, are turning their backs on them and pledging votes to religious politicians as well as a new array of independents.

They say that the rigid rules of the last century, which prohibit women from wearing Muslim head scarves in public buildings and forbid ethnic minorities to express their identities, need to be left behind.

“This election is a power struggle between those who want change and those who don’t,” said Zafer Uskul, a prominent constitutional lawyer and human rights advocate who is a candidate from Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)’s Islamic-inspired party. “Religion is just an excuse.”

He and others say the rules served a purpose when Turkey was forging a national identity out of the remains of the Ottoman Empire. But now Turkey has outgrown them.

“In 50 years, people will write that this was the time Turkey started to come to terms with its own people,” said Suat Kiniklioglu, a foreign policy expert who is one of about 20 liberal Turks who recently joined Mr. Erdogan’s party as part of its effort to appeal more broadly to secular Turkish society.

The real threat to Turkish democracy, he and others argue, comes not from Islamic fundamentalism, as the military and the secular parties it backs contend, but from political meddling by the military. Commanders have deposed elected governments four times in Turkey’s history, and in April the military challenged the government in a written statement, precipitating elections.

Now, as the elections approach, pitting the nation’s secular elite against a group of religious politicians who draw their support from the lower and middle classes, educated liberals may just tip the balance.

The current shift has its roots in the dual nature of Turkish democracy. From its beginnings in the 1940s, a powerful chain of bureaucrats, judges and army generals from the secular upper classes has controlled the most important Turkish affairs, while the elected government, currently the Justice and Development Party of Mr. Erdogan, manages more mundane aspects, much like a municipality.

But Turkish society has significantly changed in recent decades, with religious Turks gaining wealth and status and moving into public view. Women in head scarves — precisely those whom early Turkish legislation singled out — are in shopping malls, on motor scooters and behind the wheels of cars, and rules against them seem woefully outdated.

Ilhan Dogus, a member of the Young Civilians, an association of young people who oppose the military’s role in politics, said mischievously that educated women in head scarves were more likely than their less religious counterparts to know that Marx refers to a German philosopher, not the British department store, Marks and Spencer.

“This narrow shirt of secularism has become a little too tight and choking for Turkish society,” said Volkan Aytar of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, a prominent policy research group.

He is referring to Kemalism, the fiercely secular ideology that sought to extinguish religious networks and ultimately religion

itself from society.

The state elite “wanted society to fit their theory,” said Recep Senturk, a research fellow at the Center for Islamic Studies in Istanbul. “If religion doesn’t disappear, we’ll make it disappear because our theory says so.”

Liberals like Mr. Uskul are pioneers in joining political forces with Mr. Erdogan’s party, known by its Turkish initials, AK, and considered by many secular Turks to be too Islamic.

In Tarsus, an upper-middle-class town in southern Turkey that has supported secular parties, Mr. Uskul, 63, was talking to lawyers last week, asking for their votes.

“Some of you might be asking, ‘What is he doing in the AK Party?’” he said at the Tarsus Bar Association, peering earnestly through rimless glasses. “There was no other party to do what I wanted to do in Parliament. The people who should be defending democracy are holding onto military coups.”

A woman in a black T-shirt shot back: “I wonder whether you still have worries about AK as a threat to secularism?”

He replied: “My wife has no concerns. Nor does my daughter, and you shouldn’t either.”

The portion of Turkish society hanging onto the old order is shrinking, Mr. Aytar asserts, so when more than a million Turks gathered this spring to protest what they said was creeping Islamism, bizarre combinations were on display. People wore masks of Ataturk, who died more than 60 years ago. The music that played was from 1930s. “They have calcified,” said Baskin Oran, an opinionated professor running as an independent candidate in Istanbul.

Mr. Oran estimates that parties representing that order will get about a quarter of the vote, largely thanks to a campaign of fear that plays on secularism. An ad last week in Cumhuriyet, a staunchly pro-state daily, showed a black ballot box and a woman’s eyes behind the rectangular cut-out, evoking a facial veil. “Are you aware of the danger?” it said. Before the ill-fated presidential election this spring, a television ad flashed the years 1881 and 2007 on a black screen — the year of Ataturk’s birth and the year his secular reforms died.

The campaign was a final straw for some Turkish liberals, who say that it distracts from Turkey’s real problems: unemployment, insufficient social security benefits, poor relations with Kurds and Armenians and the efforts to gain membership in the [European Union](#).

A troubling offshoot is nationalists, who play on fears by warning that the European Union wants to tear Turkey apart. The main nationalist party appears set to win enough votes to make it into the Parliament, supported by Turks who are overwhelmed by the sharp changes in the country over the past five years.

When a liberal newspaper asked for a response to the ads, Ferhat Tumer, a 32-year-old advertising designer, and his colleagues at the ad agency Cocuklar began to brainstorm.

The result was a one-minute cartoon in the style of a late-night American television ad that only two Turkish television channels were willing to broadcast but that became a cult favorite overnight on the Internet.

“Is thinking a crime? Speech not allowed? Is your society excluding you, or forcing you to take sides?” the salesman-style voice-over asks in staccato Turkish. “Move away from fragile systems that are easily toppled. Original Democracy, adhered to by millions around the world, is now available in Turkey!”

The short cartoon would probably not have been possible five years ago, though Cocuklar, which means “Kids” in Turkish, had first proposed a much more confrontational version that was a direct dig at the military. The newspaper that solicited the cartoon, Radikal, though brave, was not foolhardy.

“We believe there is a hidden group of people in Turkey who are bored by this talk,” said Mr. Tumer, fiddling with a green yoyo while sitting at a glass table. “We know you’re not afraid of this scarf. When she takes it off, she still has the same ideas.”

“This paranoia, this tension, for the young generation, it’s just old-fashioned,” he said.

Inherent in Turkey's progress was a strange contradiction. The state excluded religion from public life and looked down on religious, traditional Turks as backward, yet when they became more integrated in public life, condemned them as enemies of the state.

"Secular urban forces headed by the army look at these people as if they were aliens from outer space," said Dogu Ergil, a sociology professor at Ankara University. "But they are the products of the very regime that left them out."

As Turkey moves ahead, it will have to grapple with where Islam fits in the building of an equitable society. Almost all Turks, after all, are practicing Muslims. But the argument, liberals contend, will not be over whether Islam should be part of the government, but instead over what type of secularism fits best.

Mr. Uskul argues that Turkey's bid for European Union membership, pushed by Mr. Erdogan's party, has set it on a course of democracy that virtually guarantees secularism.

"The AK Party is Turkey's reality," he said, chewing a cracker at a kebab restaurant. "Turks have to accept it."

"But it should proceed by showing it's not a threat to Turkey," he added. "I am an example of its willingness to reform."

*Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting from Istanbul and Tarsus.*

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