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## Turk With Islamic Ties Is Elected President



European Pressphoto Agency

The new president of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, front, arrived to be sworn in on Tuesday in Parliament. In his acceptance speech, he emphasized his commitment to Turkey's secular values.

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#) and [SEBNEM ARSU](#)  
Published: August 29, 2007

ANKARA, Turkey, Aug. 28 — An observant Muslim with a background in Islamic politics was voted in on Tuesday as president, breaking an 84-year grip on power by the secular establishment and ushering a new religious middle class from Turkey's heartland into the center of the staunchly secular state.

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Lawmakers approved [Abdullah Gul](#), a 56-year-old economist, with 339 votes, far above the simple majority required in the 550-member Parliament. Two candidates shared another 83 votes. The main party of the secular establishment boycotted the balloting.

The selection of Mr. Gul ended four months of political standoff that began when Turkey's secular establishment and military, vehemently opposed to his candidacy, blocked it in May, forcing a national election last month.

But Mr. Gul's party, Justice and Development, refused to back down, and his success was a rare occasion in Turkish history in which a party prevailed against the military.

There was no immediate statement from the military, which has ousted four elected governments since 1960. But its unspoken reaction was frosty: No military commander attended Mr. Gul's inaugural ceremony, a highly unusual departure from protocol, considering that he is now the commander in chief.

"This is definitely a day when we are turning a page, an important page, in the political history of the country," said Soli Ozel, a professor of international relations at Bilgi University in Istanbul.

"The boundaries have been expanded in favor of civilian democracy," he added.

As president, Mr. Gul has veto power over legislation. He also has control over hundreds

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of appointments, particularly to the judiciary. His election places his party in control of most of the Turkish state, with the posts of prime minister, speaker of Parliament and president.

The election upsets the power hierarchy in Turkey, a secular democracy whose citizens are Muslims, by opening up the presidency — an elite secular post that was first occupied by this country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk — to a new class of reform-minded leaders from Turkey's provinces, for decades considered backward by the elite.

His hometown, Kayseri, was decorated with Turkish flags, and a sound system was installed in the city center to broadcast the ceremony and celebration, a scene carried by NTV television as he succeeded Ahmet Necdet Sezer.

But he will have to work to convince skeptical Turks of the country's western cities that he will also represent them.

"He has on his shoulders a very heavy burden — an Islamist past," said Baskin Oran, a liberal-minded political science professor who ran unsuccessfully for Parliament as an independent in July. "He has to be twice as careful as a secular statesman."

In his acceptance speech in Parliament, Mr. Gul emphasized his commitment to Turkey's secular values. He renewed his pledge to push for Turkey's membership in the [European Union](#), an effort that he has led tirelessly in his four years as foreign minister.

"Secularism, one of the basic principles of our republic, is a rule of social peace," he said, dressed in a dark suit and a red tie. "My door will be open to everyone."

A decade ago, Mr. Gul's nomination would have been unthinkable: The elite and the military had kept the conservative middle class he comes from away from the center of power, on the grounds that they were the protectors of Ataturk's legacy. The vote on Tuesday changed that.

Ali Murat Yel, chairman of the sociology department at Fatih University in Istanbul, said the selection of Mr. Gul was comparable in significance to an African-American being elected president in the United States.

"It's a very important turning point," Mr. Yel said. "Those people who are the peasants and farmers and petty bourgeoisie always had republican values imposed on them. Now they are rising against it. They are saying, 'Hey, we are here, and we want our own way.'"

Though Turkey's secular establishment has taken pains to portray Mr. Gul and his close ally, Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), as inseparable from their Islamic pasts, their supporters argue they have changed dramatically since the early 1990s, when they were members of the overtly Islamic Welfare Party.

"They can sit on the same table as some people who drink alcohol and they drink their Coke, and they would be able to talk to them," Mr. Yel said. "They have come to terms with the reality of this country."

Saban Disli, a deputy from Mr. Gul's party, expressed frustration that no matter what the party did to convince Turks that its leaders had changed their ways, it was impossible to escape the label of Islamist.

"No matter what, there seems to be a sign plastered on our necks and we cannot get rid of it," he said. "The time has come for people to believe in what they see, not what they hear."

Most Turks strongly oppose the idea of a religiously oriented government, and the overwhelming portion of Mr. Gul's constituency voted for his party because they said it had done well running the country, not because its leaders were pious men. Their policies over the past four years in power have reflected a careful respect for secular principles, many say, and have brought an economic boom and rising property values.

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Beyond the elite's desire to stay in power, less privileged Turks have concerns about Mr. Gul's party, and the debate will now resume over where Islam fits in the building of an equitable society — a question also preoccupying Western democracies.

Thousands of rank-and-file party members are settling into the Turkish bureaucracy, and some Turks worry that a more conservative worldview could begin to affect their secular lifestyles in deeply personal areas, like education for their children.

"We are in uncharted waters," Mr. Ozel said. "We don't know how they will run the country. This is not a party that has articulated its world view very clearly."

Among the early business of Mr. Gul's party will be rewriting Turkey's Constitution, to remove the military influences it had absorbed in the military coups.

"It is true that the Constitution needs fundamental changes," said Akif Hamzacebi, a deputy from the secular opposition Republican People's Party, but he added that it will probably serve the party's purposes rather than Turkish society.

But many in Turkey do not agree. Mr. Oran argues that rewriting the Constitution would reserve the party a place in Turkish history books, and says that the fact that Mr. Gul's wife wears a head scarf is in fact a plus, as her presence will teach Turks to value their differences, instead of using policy to stamp religion out of all public places.

"Ankara will also come to terms that the headscarf is not a gun to be frightened of, but a personal choice to be respected," said Ahmet Hasyuncu, head of an industrial zone in Kayseri.

The American ambassador to Turkey, Ross Wilson, welcomed Mr. Gul's election.

As for the military, one apparent effect of the election has been to weaken its hold over politics. On Monday, Yasar Buyukanit, the military's chief of staff, said in a statement that "centers of evil" were working to erode secularism in Turkey. But the statement did not have the resonance of one in April, and few on Tuesday believed that there was a serious threat of a coup.

"Quite frankly, unless the world goes totally upside down, I don't see how they could find a context in which they could legitimately intervene," Mr. Ozel said.

*Sabrina Tavernise reported from Baghdad, and Sebnem Arsu from Ankara.*

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