

A Religious Candidate Is Ascendant in Turkey

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#) and [SEBNEM ARSU](#)
Published: August 28, 2007

After being shut out of the presidency last spring, Abdullah Gul, a religious man in the assiduously secular realm of Turkish politics, allowed himself a little soul-searching.



European Pressphoto Agency

Turkey's foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, is running for president, threatening the secular elite's traditional hold on power.

"Has the government limited women's rights?" Mr. Gul, 56, asked a panel of newspaper editors on national television, hoping to persuade Turkey's establishment that it had nothing to fear from his candidacy.

After all, he argued, his party was already in power, but "has the government closed down places where young people or modern people go? Has the government done some secret things and those been disclosed? What happened?"

As he saw it, he had done everything right. As foreign minister, he pushed for Turkey to join the [European Union](#). He called for changes to a law that punished writers

for "insulting Turkishness." He raised Turkey's profile abroad and helped devise a set of democratic reforms.

But for Turkey's secular class, all that was beside the point. Mr. Gul came from a party that espoused political Islam, his wife wore an Islamic head scarf and the fear that inspired outweighed his accomplishments. A high court blocked his candidacy at the request of the main secular opposition party.

Four months later, he is running again, after Turks voted overwhelmingly for his party in a national election. This time, in today's parliamentary vote, he is almost certain to win.

Turkey's secular class is still clearly uncomfortable with the choice. Turkey's powerful military, which has ousted four elected governments, said on its Web site on Monday that there were "centers of evil" that "systematically try to corrode the secular nature of the Turkish Republic."

But Turkey's secular elite won only a fifth of the vote last month, and Mr. Gul, an outsider from Turkey's religious heartland, seems to be calculating that he no longer needs its consent.

His approval will thrust a group of young, reform-minded members of the Islamic middle class into the upper echelons of secular power in Turkey, a fundamental reversal of the hierarchy in place since the founding of the state in 1923. For most of Turkey's history, upper-class Turks have occupied the presidency and imposed Western values onto the conservative Anatolian heartland below. With Mr. Gul's election, that heartland is on top.

"The pupils of Anatolia have grown up," said Joost Lagendijk, a member of the [European Parliament](#) who works on Turkish issues. "The ones that were taught by Ankara and

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Istanbul how to behave are now asking for their own representation in politics.”

Metin Heper, a political science professor at Bilkent University, argues that despite Mr. Gul’s past participation in parties that espoused political Islam, he and his close ally, [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), Turkey’s prime minister, did not. They have an entirely different motivation. A review of their political activity, Mr. Heper said, shows they want to build a strong economy and healthy society, and that Islam is a moral compass to achieve it. “They thought you need people who would be industrious, who would take things seriously, who would also act in an honest manner,” he said. “They thought religion would be a source for the internalization of such values and attitudes.”

Mr. Gul was born in Kayseri, a conservative city of religious traders and merchants on the plains of central Turkey. The city had a strong part in Turkey’s current economic boom, creating a new Islamic middle class of which Mr. Gul was a part.

His early life was more village than city. He married a woman his mother chose, and she was just 14 at the time they were introduced — half his age. But he waited for her to finish school and to reach the legal marriage age, 15, before they wed.

In Kayseri, the art of selling was the important skill, but the young Mr. Gul was considered talentless. Mehmet Ozhaseki, an old friend and mayor of Kayseri, tells how Mr. Gul failed to sell soft drinks because he was too shy to sing the jingle, “cold enough to make your 32 teeth dance to the rhythm of the violin.”

So he went into academics, putting him on track to compete for power with the secular establishment. He earned a doctorate in economics, which included study in London and Exeter. In 1983, he moved to Saudi Arabia, working in the Islamic Development Bank for eight years.

In 1991, he ran for Parliament as part of the Welfare Party, an openly Islamist party.

The party was banned after the military forced it from power in 1997. Several years later, he joined Mr. Erdogan in breaking with the conservative Islamic party and founding the Justice and Development Party, which came to power in 2002.

“They became disenchanted with the undue attention that the party gave to religion,” Mr. Heper said. “They wanted to separate religion from politics altogether.”

But many critics remain unconvinced. “There is a large group of people in Turkey who still think that the statements he has made as a member of the Islamic political movement are his fundamental thoughts and cannot change with time,” said Yilmaz Esmer, a professor at Bahcesehir University.

His supporters argue that he is an agile politician who pursued the restructuring of the Turkish state needed for entry into the European Union. Mr. Gul calls the changes a “silent revolution.”

He argues deftly before foreign audiences on topics like partition in Iraq (he is against it), and Turkey’s largely peaceful blend of Islam and democracy that makes it exceptional in its region. “For the Europeans, he is considered to be very competent and the driving force behind reforms that have taken place over the past few years,” Mr. Lagendijk said.

The question ahead, he said, is will Mr. Gul manage to include all of Turkish society in his appointments to important posts, particularly in the judiciary. “The big challenge for him is to prove he’ll be the president for all the Turks,” Mr. Lagendijk said.

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

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