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Gul Elected to Turkey's Presidency

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Parliament Defies Strongly Secular Military to Choose Figure Rooted in Political Islam

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CAIRO, Aug. 28 -- Beaming as the votes were counted, a veteran government figure with roots in political Islam won a parliamentary vote to become [Turkey's](#) president Tuesday, in defiance of the country's strongly secular military. [Abdullah Gul's](#) triumph presented Turkey's generals with a choice: overthrow Gul in what would be a deeply unpopular coup or accommodate the rise of political Islam in the Muslim world's most rigidly secular state.

Gul immediately sought to reassure the military and other doubters. "Turkey is a secular democracy. . . . These are basic values of our republic, and I will defend and strengthen these values," he told parliament after taking the oath as Turkey's 11th president.

Many Turks say the popularity of Gul's mildly Islamic [Justice and Development Party](#) after five years in power, and the unprecedented economic prosperity it has brought, will probably shield it from any immediate putsch. Turkey's military sees itself as the guardian of the secular state established by [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk](#) in 1923. Generals have driven out four governments since 1960, including an overtly Islamic government in the 1990s in which Gul held a cabinet post.

Recent overthrows have been accomplished through pressure; the military has not used force to bring down a government since 1980.

Gen. Yasar Buyukanit, chief of the military, posted a statement on the military's Web site Monday warning against "furtive plans that aim to undo modern advances and ruin the Turkish republic's secular and democratic structure." There was no immediate comment from the military after Gul's election victory.

Gul won 339 votes in the 530-seat parliament.

His wife, Hayrunisa Gul -- whose wearing of an Islamic-style head scarf has fixated Turkey's generals and others in the secular opposition -- was conspicuously absent from Gul's swearing-in ceremony later Tuesday. Turkish law forbids the head scarf in public buildings.

Also absent were the military commanders who normally attend such ceremonies.

For the government, Gul's election marked a victory after months of risky brushes with the military.

Gul initially had been poised to win the presidency in a vote parliament was to have held in April. A warning then from the military on its Web site and street protests by hundreds of thousands of secularists, as well as legal challenges, prompted Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) to back off from nominating Gul, his foreign minister.

Erdogan instead called early national elections, gambling that his party would increase its majority in parliament and strengthen his hand against the military. The move succeeded, giving the Justice and Development Party nearly 50 percent of the votes cast in the July vote, up from 34 percent in the previous vote.

Many members of Turkey's military took the vote count as a rebuke of their preelection move against a largely popular and successful democratically elected government. "In Turkey, a new period already has started," said Nejat Eslen, a retired brigadier general and an ardent supporter of secularism, speaking Tuesday by telephone after Gul's election. "And I believe the military side will watch carefully and closely."

The Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, taking parliament and the prime minister's office. Since then, Erdogan and his ministers have presented themselves far more as [Rotary Club](#) than religious zealots.

Under their guidance, Turkey's economy has been transformed, turning [Istanbul](#) into a bustle of construction projects and high-design restaurants. With Tuesday's election, Erdogan and Gul pledged to push for economic reform and constitutional amendments and try to win [European Union](#) membership.

Many Turks have been won over by the boom times, especially for a growing middle class; improvements in public services; and the ruling party's comparative restraint in helping itself to the economic spoils. But among secular Turks, there remain widespread concerns that Erdogan's government has given political Islam a toehold that will lead Turkey the way of much of the [Middle East](#), perhaps starting with lifting Ataturk's restrictions on the head scarf, outlawing alcohol or criminalizing adultery.

"With a first lady in a head scarf, a taboo is finished in Turkey. Some people are not happy about that," said Ahmet Ali Birand, a columnist in Turkey's press, which seized upon the military chief's warning as a sign of grave tension between the military and the government.

Turkey is a U.S. partner in the [NATO](#) alliance, although Turkey's opposition to the U.S. invasion of [Iraq](#) created bilateral strains. In Washington, [State Department](#) spokesman [Tom Casey](#) said Gul's election "continues the course of democratic development in that country." [President Bush](#) called Gul to congratulate him, the [White House](#) said.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party came in the same period as political gains made by the Muslim Brotherhood in [Egypt](#) and the radical Islamic group [Hamas](#) in the Palestinian territories. Hamas's gains, in particular, are regarded by many analysts in the region as leading the Bush administration to back off from its earlier avowed enthusiasm for promoting democracy in the Middle East.

But Turkey -- a country bridging [Europe](#) and [Asia](#), as well as Islam and secularism -- is different, and the Justice and Development Party doesn't fit well into the growth of political Islam elsewhere, said Omer Taspinar, a Turkey expert at the [Brookings Institution](#) in Washington.

The election success of "Hamas or Muslim Brotherhood is . . . essentially a protest vote" in countries with authoritarian leaders and little viable political opposition, Taspinar said by telephone. "But the reason the [Justice and Development Party] won is largely due to the services they have provided," he said.

Hard-liners in the military believe that "it is thanks to the military's efforts that the [party] and political Islam are learning to become moderate," Taspinar said. "Islam in Turkey is getting closer and closer to the West," he added, even as "the global trend is that Islam is getting more confrontational with the West."

Special correspondent Zehra Ayman in Istanbul contributed to this report.

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