

The Traps in Turkey's Power Shift

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THE NEW A poster of Abdullah Gul in Kayseri, his hometown.

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#) and [SEBNEM ARSU](#)
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AFTER nearly a century of strictly secular rule, Turkey last week got a new president, [Abdullah Gul](#), who is strongly disliked by the Turkish military because he is an observant Muslim with a background in Islamic politics. In his first speech as president, Mr. Gul, a 56-year-old economist, praised Turkey's secular tradition, saying it guaranteed personal freedoms. But the officer corps, which considers itself the guardian of secularism and generally doesn't trust political leaders like Mr. Gul, showed its dislike for him by skipping his appointment ceremony.

Whether the officers defy him, or try to overthrow him, as they have four elected governments since 1960, is another matter, and represents one of the largest unanswered questions hanging over Turkey's politics.

Mr. Gul and his colleagues say that they abandoned religious politics long ago. They know, they say, that all but a small percentage of Turks are very happy with their secular state.

Still, even if religion in public life is not on the table now, questions of power and class are. Mr. Gul, like many observant Muslims, is from Kayseri, a working-class city in Turkey's heartland. The urban secularists who were in power for so long are used to thinking of themselves as the elite.

Will there be a clash?

Five issues that will play out in coming weeks and months could begin to provide an answer.

THE CONSTITUTION: Turkey's Constitution was written in 1982, at the time of a military coup, and most liberal Turks say it is out of date. It limits the authority of the

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constitutional court and takes an authoritarian view of individual freedoms and rights. The members of Mr. Gul's party have made revising it a central project for their time in power. One change they want, according to Ergun Ozbudun, a constitutional law professor who worked on the draft, would limit the powers of the president over appointments.

THE EUROPEAN UNION: Mr. Gul was a leading actor in Turkey's bid to join the E.U., and in his first speech as president, he reiterated his intent to continue to pursue it. Progress toward membership might inhibit any impulse for the army to interfere in government, since democracy is a prerequisite for union membership. But Turkey's bid faces strong opposition from some countries like France, whose newly elected president, [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), wants new talks in which Turkey would be considered for "special status" as well as full membership.

APPOINTMENTS: As president, Mr. Gul has the final say over thousands of appointments to important official positions. The outgoing secularist president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, vetoed more than 400 appointments proposed by Mr. Gul's party during its four and a half years in control of Parliament, according to the presidential Web site. Now, opposition parties can do little to stop Mr. Gul from approving any candidate his party nominates, and Turks in the secular establishment fear that a disproportionate number will come from religious backgrounds. In particular, watch for his decision on the head of TRT, the state-owned television network, and on the director of the Istanbul office of the Ministry of Education.

ARTICLE 301: Mr. Gul wants to ease a rule against "insulting Turkishness" that is known as Article 301 and has been invoked against journalists and writers, including the [Nobel Prize](#) winner [Orhan Pamuk](#). The two main opposition political parties — representing nationalists and the secular establishment — are expected to oppose changing the law, as are some leaders in Mr. Gul's party. But the party is expected to amend it, in the face of strong criticism from the E.U.

KURDISH SEPARATISM: Mr. Gul's party has taken a more conciliatory line toward Kurds in the country's southeast than has Turkey's military, but that point of friction between them may be easing. Many Kurdish politicians are known for their loyalty to [Abdullah Ocalan](#), a Kurdish militant now in captivity, and Kurdish political leaders in Parliament did not sing along to the national anthem during Mr. Gul's inauguration. That is sure to irritate many Turks and make it harder for Mr. Gul's government to reconcile with the Kurds. Meanwhile, the military's attitude may be moderating from the other direction. In June, it was advocating a large-scale push into northern Iraq, where it says many Kurdish militants hide, but that pressure has since quieted.

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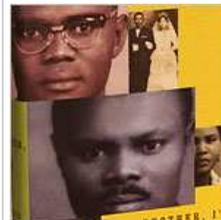


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