

January 19, 2008

Head Scarf Debate Intensifies in Turkey

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ISTANBUL — An angry debate over a ban on the Islamic head scarf, which is strictly forbidden in public buildings in Turkey, spilled into view this week, with the country's secular elite vehemently opposing any loosening of the restriction.

The head scarf ban is one of the most emotionally charged issues in Turkey today. This week's back-and-forth between politicians from two different classes of society — a rising group of observant politicians and a secular elite that has long ruled the country — signals a larger battle to come as the two groups struggle for control of the Turkish state.

On Friday, one of Turkey's highest courts, the Council of State, issued a stern warning on its Web site about loosening the restriction in universities, saying that allowing head scarves in universities would mean their use could spread to other public buildings, "ultimately hurting peace in society." Turkey's judiciary, one of the principal parts of the state from which the secular elite derives its power, banned head scarves in universities in the late 1980s.

Together with the military, the judiciary makes up a powerful elite class, which has steered Turkey from behind the scenes since [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#) founded the modern Turkish state in 1923, issuing court rulings and carrying out military coups when secularism — or its interests — are threatened. Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), who leads the observant politicians, is challenging that elite's power.

The council was responding to Mr. Erdogan, who remarked Tuesday during an official visit to Spain that even if the head scarf was worn as a political symbol as its critics charged, that did not give legal justification for banning it.

"Today, in a world where freedoms are debated, where everyone dresses up the way they want to everywhere they go, if Turkey still fails to resolve this issue, this is a serious problem in terms of freedoms," Mr. Erdogan said, according to NTV television.

Mr. Erdogan is trying to address the concerns of observant Turks who carried his party to a landslide victory in national elections in July. They want the ban lifted, arguing that it discriminates against observant women by keeping them out of college and public jobs.

Another secular response came Thursday night, when Turkey's most senior prosecutor, Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, issued a sharp statement against lifting the ban.

"Political parties cannot hold any motives, perform any actions or issue any statements to change the secular principle of the republic," Mr. Yalcinkaya said in a statement, according to the state-run Anatolian News Agency.

"It is clear that the rejection of the 85-year-long gains of the republic and its basic principles will not bring any good to the country," he said tartly, "but will first raise consciousness among the people and then lead to separatism and clashes."

Mr. Erdogan's party is expected to include a guarantee in a new draft of the Turkish Constitution that would protect covered women's rights to attend university. But that will take months and Mr. Erdogan seems to be seeking a speedier solution.

"The resolution is very simple," he said. "We sit together and it gets resolved by a sentence that we reach an agreement on."

He was helped by a smaller, nationalist political party, the Nationalist Movement Party, which said Thursday that it would vote for changes, and even proposed some wording.

Mr. Erdogan seems to have touched a nerve: Mr. Yalcinkaya's criticisms went beyond the head scarf into issues of ethnic and religious minorities, long oppressed by the Turkish state but wooed by Mr. Erdogan's party in its election campaign last year.

“They cannot aim to separate the unity of the country by trying to create minorities on the basis of protecting, improving and spreading any other languages and cultures other than Turkish language and culture,” he said.

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting from Istanbul.

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