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In Turkey, a Step to Allow Head Scarves



Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Turkish women demonstrated for the right to wear head scarves in government buildings, including public offices and universities.

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**
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ISTANBUL — Turkey's governing political party — a class of young, observant Muslim politicians — reached an agreement late Monday to lift a ban on the wearing of head scarves by women attending universities, a move likely to enrage the country's staunchly secular old guard and clear the way for a more openly religious society.

The party, led by Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), agreed with a smaller nationalist party to amend several articles in the Constitution that they say will provide a guarantee to covered women, who have been barred from higher education since the late 1990s by a court ruling. Some get around the ban by wearing hats and wigs. Mr. Erdogan, whose party, Justice and Development, was re-elected in a landslide vote in July, has made lifting the ban a priority, because a large part of his constituency is observant Muslims, who feel that the state has discriminated against them for too long.

But the agreement, announced in a brief statement shortly before midnight on Monday, sets the stage for a broader fight between Mr. Erdogan, who favors a more religiously observant Turkey, and the entrenched secular old guard — the military and the judiciary, which has steered the state from behind the scenes since it was created in 1923.

The changes will be submitted to Parliament on Tuesday, and though the measure has enough votes to pass, the political party closest to the military, the Republican People's Party, is likely to challenge it in the courts, which tend to rule in favor of the military.

The military, which has deposed four elected governments since 1960, delivered a sharp

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rebuke to Mr. Erdogan last spring when he was pressing for the selection of a close ally, an observant Muslim, as president. The military despises Mr. Erdogan because the democratic changes he is making in Turkey are slowly taking away its power.

The head scarf is a deeply emotional issue here, with its ban representing the feeling for religious Turks of being second-class citizens in their own country, and its growing public presence representing a changing society that secular Turks feel is no longer their own.

In a passionate speech to an auditorium full of covered female party members in Istanbul on Sunday, Mr. Erdogan emphasized that being religious did not preclude respecting the secular contours of Turkey's state, a central charge of the old-guard elite.

"What do they say — only citizens without head scarves can be secular?" he said to the women, in remarks broadcast on Turkish television. "They are making a mistake falling into such segregation. This is a society of those, with and without head scarves, who support a democratic, secular social law state."

Millions of rural, observant Turks migrated to cities in the 1980s, became middle class in an economic boom, and began to mix with their secular, urban counterparts in malls, parks and, by the late 1990s, universities.

Their continued religiosity contradicts the theory that [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk](#), Turkey's founder, applied in the 1920s that belief would die away with increased wealth and education.

"I am the walking proof of the failure of their theory," said Hilal Kaplan, a graduate student in sociology. "I'm an enlightened woman, and I wear the head scarf. It just doesn't make sense to them."

The proposal left open the question of whether covered women, who are also barred from working as public servants, would be allowed in other public spheres as well.

An overwhelming majority of Turks support lifting the ban in universities, but support becomes shakier for extending those freedoms to primary schools and high schools.

Ayşe Gul Altınay, a professor at Sabancı University who has deliberately included the writings of covered women in her courses so that their voices are heard, says the ban against covered women in universities is "indefensible," but argues that lifting it for younger students was more problematic.

"It's different for a child," she said. In very conservative towns "there's a very real danger of social pressure."

But years of blocking what many see as a basic demand has built up frustration. "It had been so inflexible for so long," Ms. Altınay said. "Unfortunately, we've asked for it."

Mr. Erdogan seemed to indicate as much in his speech to the women of his party.

"This issue has been debated for 40 years and been a struggle for 18 years," he said. "This issue should be off the agenda."

Also on Monday, a Turkish court convicted Atilla Yayla, a college professor who is now teaching in England, and sentenced him to 15 months in prison for insulting the memory of Turkey's founder. The judge suspended the sentence, however, saying it would be applied only if he committed another offense. One of Mr. Yayla's lawyers said the ruling would be appealed.

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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