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NEWS ANALYSIS

For Many Turks, Head Scarf's Return Aids Religion and Democracy



Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Women in Istanbul protested last week against a ban on head scarves in universities. The ban is expected to be lifted soon.

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**
Published: January 30, 2008

ISTANBUL — The Turkish government's decision this week to lift a ban on women wearing head scarves in universities raised a troubling question: Is Islam starting to erode Turkey's secular democracy?

But in Turkey, looks are often deceiving. A majority of Turks see the measure — submitted Tuesday to Parliament, where it is expected to pass — as good for both religion and democracy.

Here, the country's most observant citizens have been its most active democrats, while its staunchly secular old guard — represented by the military and the judiciary — has acted by coup and court order.

The paradox goes to the heart of modern Turkey, a vibrant Muslim democracy of 70 million people between Europe and the Middle East. Its elected governments have never fully run the country. They are watched — and blocked — by an immensely powerful coterie of generals and judges who inherited power from [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#), the former general who created modern Turkey in 1923 from Ottoman remains.

The system he set up was secular but divided by class, with the urban elite, known as "white Turks," intervening when they thought political leaders elected by the poorer, observant heartland were veering off course.

"The citizen is perceived as a small, incapable child that can constantly damage something," said Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat, a member of the governing party. The state "builds a garden fence around this child," he said.

Now, for the first time in Turkish history, that underclass, represented by the Justice and

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Development Party of Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), is challenging the old order and, at least for now, getting away with it.

Turkey is like a restless expatriate that spent most of the past century in the West trying to escape its previous six centuries as the capital of the Muslim East, and the challenge to the old guard over an item like the head scarf is, in many ways, Turkey becoming more itself.

While many in educated Turkish society bristle when the country is seen as part of the Muslim Middle East, instead of Europe, a majority remain fairly observant.

A 2006 study by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, a respected research institute based in Istanbul, found that 59 percent of Turks described themselves as "very religious" or "extremely religious." About two-thirds of the women in the study, which interviewed 1,500 people across Turkey, said they covered their heads in some way when they left the house.

So Mr. Erdogan's proposal is likely to have broad support.

"It should be known that we are not working for anything else other than to stop the unjust treatment against our girls at university entrances," Mr. Erdogan said Tuesday in Parliament.

Turkish liberals, like Ergun Ozbudun, a law professor in Ankara who has been appointed by the government to rewrite the Constitution, tend to agree.

"It's an issue of human rights, not secularism," said Mr. Ozbudun, who has taught overseas. "In the U.S., I had Jewish students wearing yarmulkes and nobody cared."

The leader of the secular opposition party, Deniz Baykal, 69, who has run the party for almost 20 years, played on familiar fears.

"Moves to end the head scarf ban are aimed at the very foundations of Ataturk's secular republic," Mr. Baykal said.

The proposal "has paved the way for the intrusion of the turban, as it is called," he said, referring to the hijab, a scarf that covers the hair and neck, as "something that is not part of our nation, history, traditions or culture."

"An exported article of clothing that has been imposed on Turkey from outside," he said.

For Hilal Kaplan, a graduate student who wears one, the talk sounds woefully outdated.

"It's like the ground cracked open, and people from the 1930s crawled out," she said.

Harder-line secular opposition members also invoked analogies to Fascism. On a popular talk show debate this week, a professor, Emre Kongar, cited the ban on the swastika in Germany and said that if symbols pose a threat "they can be prohibited."

While much of the debate is stuck in superficialities, deeper issues occasionally flash into view. They involve some of the questions that have become so central to informed American and European thinking: Where does Islam fit in the building of an open society? How does one allow religious freedoms without eroding secular rights or opening the way for religious leaders to push into politics?

Most of those questions remain unanswered. Mr. Erdogan made unprecedented progress in his first five-year term, retooling the government in a bid to join the [European Union](#), starting a dialogue with Turkey's Kurdish minority and pressing Turks to accept an agreement on Cyprus, which Turkey invaded in 1974.

He has argued, so far convincingly, that there is no reason the machine of secular Turkish democracy cannot be operated by observant Muslims. But with its firmer grip on power — the party controls the presidency, the government and Parliament — many liberals fear it

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will begin to stamp its image on Turkey through its rank and file.

Jenny B. White, an American who has studied Turkey since the 1970s, said that leaders of Mr. Erdogan's party defended individual rights strongly in speeches but that putting words to action might be another matter.

"Democracy is not just a technology," she said. "It involves tolerance of people you don't agree with."

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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