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Turkey's Parliament Lifts Scarf Ban



Umit Bektaş/Reuters

Secular Turks seeking to keep a head scarf ban protested Saturday in Ankara, some with photos of the republic's founder, Ataturk.

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)
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ISTANBUL — Parliament took a major step on Saturday toward lifting a ban against women's head scarves at universities, setting the stage for a final showdown with Turkey's secular elite over where Islam fits in the building of an open society.

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Lawmakers with the ruling party showed their support on Saturday for allowing women to wear head scarves at universities.

Lawmakers voted overwhelmingly in favor of a measure supported by Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) to change the Constitution in a way they say will guarantee all citizens the right to go to college regardless of how they dress.

The authorities imposed the ban in the late 1990s, arguing that the growing number of covered women in colleges threatened secularism, one of the founding principles of modern Turkey.

Secular opposition lawmakers voted against the change, with about a fifth of all ballots cast. Crowds of secular Turks backed them on the streets of the capital, Ankara, chanting that secularism — and women's right to resist being forced to wear head scarves by an increasingly conservative society — was under threat.

"This decision will bring further pressure on women," said Nesrin Baytok, a member of Parliament from the opposition secular party, during the debate in Parliament. "It will ultimately bring us [Hezbollah](#) terror, [Al Qaeda](#) terror and fundamentalism."

Another member from that party, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, said the group would take the amendments to the Constitutional Court, a pro-secular institution that is likely to rule

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against Mr. Erdogan. That process must wait until the changes are approved by the president and published in the official state newspaper.

The head scarf ban, and the push to repeal it by Mr. Erdogan's governing party, has become one of the most emotional issues in Turkey. It pits a rising, increasingly wealthy middle class of observant Turks, on one side, against a secular elite, backed by the military and the judiciary, on the other.

"It's all about power," said Jenny B. White, an anthropologist at [Boston University](#) who has been studying Turkey since the 1970s. "It's about who gets to decide what Turkey's image and emblematic lifestyle will be. Islam is the lightning rod for all the fears and concerns."

Many secular Turks are concerned that the Justice and Development Party led by Mr. Erdogan has such significant power, controlling Parliament, the presidency and the prime ministry, that it will impose its own conservative values on Turkey.

"It's been presented as a liberty to cover the head, but in practice, it is going to evolve into a ban on uncovered hair," said Hikmet Sami Turk, a former justice minister, speaking on NTV television.

Turkey's current tensions are rooted in its recent past, when migrants from the country's more observant heartland moved to cities, starting in the 1950s, in a process that changed Turkey into an urban society.

But it remained divided by class, and when many covered women began entering universities and taking public sector jobs, the secular elite banned head scarves.

Now, Mr. Erdogan is trying to lift the ban, and the debate, which began in Parliament on Wednesday, has been emotional.

"I will entrust liver to a cat, but won't entrust secularism to you," Deniz Baykal, the head of the secular opposition party, said Wednesday, according to Today's Zaman, an English-language daily newspaper.

Cemil Cicek, a conservative member of Mr. Erdogan's party, countered, "We are not trying to bring a ban; we are trying to lift a ban."

"Why aren't you willing to reach consensus, but spread radioactive fear and horror across the country like the Chernobyl power station?" he asked in Wednesday's debate. "What is this?"

Turkey is groping toward a new understanding of itself. Observant Turks, the underclass for years, are now firmly part of the elite, and hard questions have emerged about how to share public space, like college campuses and public buildings.

Those who argue for retaining the ban say they do not oppose the head scarf worn in times past by grandmothers, tied babushka-style under the chin.

Nilufer Gole, a Turkish sociologist who wrote "The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling," argues that the past generation was mostly working class, and therefore not threatening, while today's wealthier covered women are.

"We liked our grandmothers because they were just knitting," she said by telephone from Paris. "They were never trying to go to university."

Turkey's booming economy is a great equalizer. On the streets of Istanbul, young women in jeans, stylish T-shirts and Keds wear head scarves of all colors. Young observant women are more integrated than ever.

"For me it's a good sign," Ms. Gole said. "It means they are participating."

Still, Turkey is entering uncharted waters in its attempts to balance liberal democracy,



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Islam and secularism, and Western models do not show the way.

“It’s not like a Sikh policeman wearing a turban under his helmet in England,” said Murat Belge, a professor at Bilgi University in Istanbul. In Britain, Sikhs are a tiny minority. In Turkey, he said, those asking to have their way are a majority.

That majority, many secularists believe, is using the veil as a first step toward a repressive Islamic state.

But Ms. White, writing in a Turkish newspaper on Friday, said the veil’s political meaning is in the eye of the beholder. “Meaning,” she wrote, “is in our heads, not on our heads.”

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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