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Divided Turkey Debates Rights, Religion

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By CHRISTOPHER TORCHIA

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ISTANBUL, Turkey -- Turkey's leader, a devout Muslim, talks a lot about morality these days. It's language that alarms secular Turks, who fear the government plans to make religion a part of their lives.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan says he is addressing religious freedom and the demands of a pious electorate, and has no desire to topple the secular pillars of a nation of 70 million that is often praised as a model of coexistence between Islam and democracy.

Parliament voted this past weekend to lift a ban on the wearing of Islamic head scarves by female students in universities after a polarizing debate that delayed progress on key reforms required to achieve Turkey's goal of membership in the European Union.

Chief among them the EU demands is the repeal or amendment of Article 301, a law that limits free speech by making it a crime to insult the Turkish identity, such as its use to prosecute Nobel literature laureate Orhan Pamuk.

On Wednesday, the prime minister condemned some aspects of secular culture that have taken root in Turkey, even as he said women who do not cover their hair in line with Islamic tradition would not be pressured to do so.

"We guarantee their lifestyle," Erdogan said. But he criticized secular media for publishing racy photographs of female models: "You are the ones who print pictures of totally naked women on newspapers against this society's moral values. Have we interfered with that?"

On Wednesday, some Turkish newspapers carried photographs of women in lingerie, with captions about Valentine's Day on the front and back pages. "I know what a man wants," one headline read. The Sabah and Vatan newspapers printed images of Marisa Miller, the cover model of the 2008 swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated.

Erdogan's comments echoed remarks last month to a group of students who were preparing to study abroad. At that meeting, he seemed to refer to the failure of the Ottoman Empire to absorb the best of Western innovation, a factor that led to its collapse early in the 20th century.

"We could not adopt the West's science and arts. Unfortunately, we have adopted its immorality, which is contrary to our values," Erdogan said.

The debate about morality reflects a broader change under way in Turkey, where the Islamic-oriented government won by a landslide in parliamentary elections last year with the help of conservative Muslims from modest backgrounds.

The subsequent election of President Abdullah Gul, a close ally of Erdogan, was another blow to secular, privileged circles dominated by the military, the courts and the bureaucracy.

Cuneyt Ulsever, a columnist for one of Turkey's biggest newspapers, Hurriyet, said the societal divide is based on economics and social status as well as religion.

Supporters of the ruling party feel they "have been denied good jobs, good positions, even walking in good streets, in the past," Ulsever said. "They now have the feeling that they are getting their revenge."

He said he believes Erdogan is lukewarm about some aspects of Turkey's European project, particularly if he feels they conflict with the desires of his grass-roots supporters, who are preparing for local elections in early 2009.

"There is a mass which believes and trusts us," Erdogan said Wednesday. "That mass has silently waited for years and years. Now, they have sent us as politicians to express their wishes. So, it is our duty to express their wishes."

Public opinion polls have shown a sharp drop in Turks' enthusiasm for joining the European Union amid snags in negotiations and European ambivalence over admitting a Muslim state.

Turkey revised its penal code in 2004 to meet some European demands, granting more rights to women and dropping an earlier attempt by Erdogan to criminalize adultery.

Pinar Ilkkaracan, head of an advocacy group called Women for Women's Human Rights, said activists fought successfully to keep references to "morality" out of the new laws, arguing that the term is often linked to sexuality and religious values at the expense of women's rights.

Ilkkaracan supports the lifting of restrictions on Islamic head scarves at universities, which awaits the president's approval. But she said

talk among government officials of morality, as well as the Islamic code of conduct known by the Arabic term "adab," could threaten freedom.

"This is very much in line with religious fundamentalist discourse," she said.

Associated Press writer Selcan Hacaoglu in Ankara contributed to this report.

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