

February 19, 2008

Tension About Religion and Class in Turkey

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ISTANBUL — When two women in Islamic head scarves were spotted in an Italian restaurant in this city's new shopping mall this month, Gulbin Simitcioglu did a double take.

Covered women, long seen as backward peasants from the countryside, "have started to be everywhere," said Ms. Simitcioglu, a sales clerk in an Italian clothing store, and it is making women like her more than a little uncomfortable. "We are Turkey's image. They are ruining it."

As Turkey lurches toward a repeal of a ban on head scarves at universities, the country's secular upper middle class is feeling increasingly threatened.

Religious Turks, once the underclass of society here, have become educated and middle class, and are moving into urban spaces that were once the exclusive domain of the elite. Now the repeal of the scarf ban — pressed by Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), passed by Parliament and now just awaiting an official signature — is again setting the groups against each other, unleashing fears that have as much to do with class rivalry as with the growing influence of Islam.

While the public debate here typically revolves around Islam and how much space it should have in Turkish society — a legitimate concern in a country whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim and deeply conservative — the struggle over power is a glaring, if often unspoken, part of the tension between the groups. Secular women at parties speak disdainfully of covered women and the neighborhoods they populate. Older people shake their heads and cluck their tongues at them. High school boys yell, "Go back to Iran."

Adamantly secular Turks "don't encounter them as human beings," said Atilla Yayla, a Turkish political philosophy professor teaching in England, referring to religious Turks. "They want them to evaporate, to disappear as fast as possible."

That attitude surfaced with the repeal of the ban by Parliament this month.

One professor declared bluntly that universities should "close the gates until the administrators of the country come back to their senses." Another argued that covered students could cheat by using cellphone headsets under their scarves. The worry, secular Turks said, was that covered women in universities would soon graduate and expect to wear their scarves in civil service jobs, transforming the Turkish state from secular to religious.

"I wasn't sure before but now I am sure," said a 32-year-old lawyer in a Starbucks in a fashionable Istanbul neighborhood. "Their real intent is to bring Shariah."

Turks who support lifting the ban have drawn analogies with school integration in the United States. In a speech to Parliament, Nursuna Memecan, a deputy from Mr. Erdogan's party, referred to a 1957 photograph of a white girl shouting at a black student entering Little Rock Central High School, highlighting the girl's apology decades later.

"There is a reaction that we may regret," Ms. Memecan said. She said fears about growing religiosity were groundless. Observant Turks are not growing in numbers, she said. They have always been there but were not visible in educated society.

"We weren't sitting with them on planes," she said. "They didn't go to our restaurants. We have to learn to share the cake with them."

Hasan Bulent Kahraman, a professor at Sabanci University in Istanbul, said: "Cleaning ladies are all in head scarves, and no one says anything. But if a judge wants to cover her head, the problem is triggered."

Turkey is different from the United States, secular Turks argue. The fight here is not about skin color, but a religious belief that seeks to impose an ideology, they say. Islam dictates rules for daily life, many of them limiting for women, and secular women argue that Islam's growth in Turkey will inevitably lead to a society that is less free for women.

"To associate the head scarf with freedom sounds a little cynical," said Ayse Bugra, a political economist at Bogazici University in Istanbul, "since it is clearly about limiting the way in which a woman can appear in public." Women are "clearly inferior," in Islam, whose rules limit inheritance for women and allow men multiple wives, she argued, pointing out that Turkey's president, [Abdullah Gul](#), at the age of 30, met his wife, Hayrunnisa, when she was just 14.

"If you ask her, did she choose freely to wear the head scarf? She'd say 'yes.' What does that mean?"

Turkey is one of the world's most permissive Muslim societies, a result, in part, of [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's](#) secular revolution, which began in the 1920s. Only 10 percent of the population was literate at the time, and a secular elite took control of religion and gave women rights. But years passed, and observant Turks became educated and wealthy, without losing their religion, traveling abroad and taking part in politics, forming a new Islamic elite in large Western cities, where they mixed with their secular counterparts.

But for women in scarves, fancy neighborhoods can be intimidating. Muazzez Yildiz, a 30-year-old candy shop clerk in a pink tunic and polka dot scarf, said she felt, "inferior, uncomfortable, self-conscious," in areas where she is the only woman in a scarf.

That is, in part, because covered and uncovered women from past generations did not socialize with one another, said Hediye Kose, 24, as she sliced bread in a bakery. Covered women are now far more integrated into the general society than their mothers, working in the city and even going to university.

"Most of the head scarf women are doing something that their mothers didn't," said Nil Mutluer, a lecturer at Kadir Has University in Istanbul. "There is a change in the society. How do we define what is modern? We need to rethink these terms."

Indeed, the strongest reactions to the ban seem to come from older Turks. In a middle class neighborhood on the Asian side of the city, an elderly artist yelled at an older, covered woman in a pharmacy, blaming her — and her scarf — for the country's troubles. Ms. Kose said the women who scold her for wearing a scarf tend to be over the age of 60.

A sizable portion of Turkey's secular society is uncomfortable limiting liberties, including wearing head scarves, but does not trust Mr. Erdogan to work as hard for other communities as he does for the religious one. Turkey does not have a tradition of tolerance, and secular Turks are afraid that religious Turks, now settling deeply into the bureaucracy, will change the laws and wield power to benefit themselves.

"An Islamic way of thinking can bring its own authoritarianism," said Burhan Senatalar, a professor at Bilgi University in Istanbul. Society has already grown more religious, he argued, pointing out that special state-run religious schools — strongly supported by Mr. Erdogan's party — have been allowed to flourish. Mr. Erdogan himself comes from a background of political Islam, and memories of his sharp Islamic talk from the 1990s have left secular Turks deeply suspicious of his motives.

Still, the fear of what might occur in the future is not a reason to keep the ban on head scarves, said Yildiray Ogur, an editor at Taraf, a liberal daily newspaper.

"I don't see any real arguments," he said. "'I'm afraid, so I'm right.' This is the motto" of the adamantly secular class in Turkey now. He added: "You are afraid of totalitarianism, but you can support it today in order to prevent it in the future."

Meanwhile, universities across Turkey are preparing for the final approval of the ban's repeal, which will go into effect after Mr. Gul signs it into law this week. Faruk Karadogan, the rector of Istanbul Technical University, said he was expecting confusion.

"The problem is not the scarf; it's their way of thinking, their minds," he said of observant Turks. "If you have somebody brainwashed like that, it's very hard to get her back to a way of contemporary thinking."

But a few buildings away, Ece Ulgen, 20, a chemistry student whose classmates include covered women (they wear hats or wigs), offered a different view.

“I have many friends who wear the head scarf,” she said. “I enjoy their friendship. They’re clever, smart women. Not like what people say: Unscientific and only interested in religion.”

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