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GENERATION FAITHFUL

Youthful Voice Stirs Challenge to Secular Turks

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ISTANBUL — High school hurt for Havva Yilmaz. She tried out several selves. She ran away. Nothing felt right.

“There was no sincerity,” she said. “It was shallow.”

So at 16, she did something none of her friends had done: She put on an Islamic head scarf.

In most Muslim countries, that would be a nonevent. In Turkey, it was a rebellion. Turkey has built its modern identity on secularism. Women on billboards do not wear scarves. The scarves are banned in schools and universities. So Ms. Yilmaz dropped out of school. Her parents were angry. Her classmates stopped calling her.

Like many young people at a time of religious revival across the Muslim world, Ms. Yilmaz, now 21, is more observant than her parents. Her mother wears a scarf, but cannot read the Koran in Arabic. They do not pray five times a day. The habits were typical for their generation — Turks who moved from the countryside during industrialization.

“Before I decided to cover, I knew who I was not,” Ms. Yilmaz said, sitting in a leafy Ottoman-era courtyard. “After I covered, I finally knew who I was.”

While her decision was in some ways a recognizable act of youthful rebellion, in Turkey her personal choices are part of a paradox at the heart of the country’s modern identity.

Turkey is now run by a party of observant Muslims, but its reigning ideology and law are strictly secular, dating from the authoritarian rule in the 1920s of [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#), a former army general who pushed Turkey toward the West and cut its roots with the Ottoman East. For some young people today, freedom means the right to practice Islam, and self-expression means covering their hair.

They are redrawing lines between freedom and devotion, modernization and tradition, and blurring some prevailing distinctions between East and West.

Ms. Yilmaz’s embrace of her religious identity has thrust her into politics. She campaigned to allow women to wear scarves on college campuses, a movement that prompted emotional, often agonized, debates across Turkey about where Islam fit into an open society. That question has paralyzed politics twice in the past year and a half, and has drawn hundreds of thousands into the streets to protest what they call a growing religiosity in society and in government.

By dropping out of the education system, she found her way into Turkey's growing, lively culture of young activists.

She attended a political philosophy reading group, studying Hegel, St. Augustine and Machiavelli. She took sociology classes from a free learning center. She met other activists, many of them students trying to redefine words like "modern," which has meant secular and Western-looking for decades. She made new friends, like Hilal Kaplan, whose scarf sometimes had a map of the world on it.

Their fight is not solely about Islam. Turkey is in ferment, and Ms. Yilmaz and her young peers are demanding equal rights for all groups in Turkey. They are far less bothered by the religious and ethnic differences that divide older generations. "Turkey is not just secular people versus religious people," Ms. Kaplan said. "We were a very segregated society, but that segregation is breaking up."

In a slushy week in the middle of January, the head scarf became the focus of a heated national outpouring, and Ms. Yilmaz one of its most eloquent defenders.

The government of Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) pledged to pass a law letting women who wear them into college. Staunchly secular Turks opposed broader freedoms for Islam, in part because they did not trust Mr. Erdogan, a popular politician who began his career championing a greater role for Islam in politics and who has since moderated his stance.

Turkey remains a democratic experiment unique in the Muslim world. The Ottomans dabbled in democracy as early as 1876, creating a Constitution and a Parliament. The country was never colonized by Western powers, as Arabs were. It gradually developed into a vibrant democracy. The fact that young people like Ms. Yilmaz are protesting at all is one of its distinguishing features.

In many ways, Ms. Yilmaz's scarf freed her, but for many other women, it is the opposite. In poor, religiously conservative areas in rural Turkey, girls wear scarves from young ages, and many Turks feel strongly that without state regulation, young women would come under more pressure to cover up.

The head scarf bill, in that respect, could lead to less freedom for women, they argued. But for Ms. Yilmaz, the anger against the bill was hard to understand.

So one day, armed with a microphone and a strong sense of justice, Ms. Yilmaz marched into a hotel in central Istanbul and, with two friends, both in scarves, made her best case.

"The pain that we've been through as university doors were harshly shut in our faces taught us one thing," she said, speaking to reporters. "Our real problem is with the mentality of prohibition that thinks it has the right to interfere with people's lives."

Ms. Yilmaz's heartfelt speech, written with her friends, drew national attention. They were invited on television talk shows. They gave radio and newspaper interviews. Part of their appeal came from their attempt to go beyond religion to include all groups in Turkish society, like ethnic and sectarian minorities.

After Ms. Yilmaz left high school, she joined a group called the Young Civilians, a diverse band of young people who used dark humor and occasional references to the philosopher Michel Foucault to criticize everything from the state's repression of Kurds, the biggest ethnic minority, to its day of "Youth and Sport," a series of Soviet-style rallies of students in stadiums every spring.

Their symbol was a Converse sneaker. Their members were funny and irreverent. One once joked that if you mentioned the name Marx, young women without head scarves assumed you were talking about the British department store Marks & Spencer, while ones in scarves understood the reference to the philosopher.

In a tongue-in-cheek effort to change perceptions of Kurds, the group ran a discussion program called "Let's Get a Little Kurdish," which featured sessions on Kurdish music, history and — in a particularly rebellious twist — even language.

By March, the month after Parliament passed the final version of the head scarf proposal, the debate had reached a frenzied pitch. Ms. Yilmaz and some friends — some in scarves, some not — agreed to go on a popular television talk show. The audience's questions were angry.

One young woman stood up and, looking directly at another in a scarf, said that she did not want her on campus, said Neslihan Akbulut, a friend of Ms. Yilmaz, who had helped to compose the head scarf statement. Another said she felt sorry for them because they were oppressed by men. A third fretted that allowing them into universities would lead to further demands about jobs, resulting in an "invasion."

Ms. Yilmaz said later: "I thought, are we living in the same country? No, it's impossible."

They did not give up. They spent the day in a drafty cafe in central Istanbul, wearing boots and coats and going over their position with journalists, one by one.

"If women are ever forced to wear head scarves, we should be equally sensitive and stand against it," Ms. Akbulut said.

One of the journalists said, "You don't support gays."

Ms. Kaplan countered: "Islam tells us to fight this urge," but she said that did not affect a homosexual's rights as a citizen. "I am against police oppression of homosexuals. I am against a worldview that diminishes us to our scarves and homosexuals to the bedroom."

Ms. Yilmaz agreed. "When you wear a scarf," she said, "you are expected to act and think in a certain way, and support a certain political party. You're stripped of your personality."

The young women say that the scarf, contrary to popular belief, was not forced on them by their families. Some women wear it because their mothers did. For others, like Ms. Yilmaz, it was a carefully considered choice.

Though it is not among the five pillars of Islam — the duties required for every Muslim, including daily prayer — Ms. Yilmaz sees it as a command in the Koran.

“Physical contact is something special, something private,” she said, describing the thinking behind her covering. “Constant contact takes away from the specialness, the privacy of the thing you share.”

Still, in Turkey, traditional rules are often bent to accommodate modern life. Handshaking, for example, is a widespread Turkish custom, and most women follow it. Turkey is culturally very different from Arab societies, and for that reason interprets Islam differently. Islam here is heavily influenced by Sufism, an introspective strain that tends to be more flexible.

“You can’t reject an extended hand,” Ms. Kaplan said. “You don’t want to break a person’s heart.”

Young activists like Ms. Yilmaz are driving change in Turkish society against a backdrop of growing materialism and consumerism. Most young Turks care little for politics and are instead occupied with the daily task of paying the bills.

That is an easier task in Turkey than in a number of Middle Eastern countries, because Turkey is relatively affluent. After three decades of intense development, its economy is five times bigger than Egypt’s — a country with roughly the same population.

The wealth has profoundly shaped young lives. In cities, young people no longer have to live with their parents after marriage. They take mortgages. They buy furniture on credit. They compete for jobs in new fields like marketing, finance and public relations.

In past generations, women lived with their husband’s families, doubling their work.

“When you don’t have time to do anything for yourself, you don’t have time to question anything, even religion,” Ms. Kaplan said.

The economic changes that have swept Turkish society, bringing cellphones, iPods and the Internet, are transforming the younger generation. Young people are more connected to the Western world than ever before. A quick visit to a bookstore or a movie theater offers proof.

Observant Turks are grappling with questions like: Where does praying fit in a busy life of e-mail messages and 60-hour weeks? How do you hold on to Eastern tradition in a rising tide of Western culture?

The head scarf debate ended abruptly in June, when Turkey’s Constitutional Court ruled that the new law allowing women attending universities to wear scarves was unconstitutional, because it violated the nation’s principles of secularism.

Ms. Yilmaz got the news in a text message from her friend. In her bitter disappointment, she realized how much hope she had held out. “How can I be a part of a country that does not accept me?” she said.

Still, she has no regrets and is not giving up. “What we did was worth something,” she said. “People heard our voices. One day the prohibition is imposed on us. The next day, it could be someone else. If we work together, we can fight it.”

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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