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Newfound Riches Come With Spiritual Costs for Turkey's Religious Merchants

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)

ISTANBUL — Turkey's religious businessmen spent years building empires on curtains, candy bars and couches. But as observant Muslims in one of the world's most self-consciously secular states, they were never accepted by elite society.

Now that group has become its own elite, and Turkey, a more openly religious country. It has lifted an Islamic-inspired political party to power and helped make Turkey the seventh largest economy in Europe.

And while other Muslim societies are wrestling with radicals, Turkey's religious merchant class is struggling instead with riches.

"Muslims here used to be tested by poverty," said Sehminur Aydin, an observant Muslim businesswoman and the daughter of a manufacturing magnate. "Now they're being tested by wealth."

Some say religious Turks are failing that test, and they see the recent economic crisis as a lesson for those who indulged in the worst excesses of consumption, summed up in the work of one Turkish interior designer: a bathroom with faucets encrusted with Swarovski crystal, a swimming pool in the bedroom, a couch rigged to rise up to the ceiling by remote control during prayer. "I know people who broke their credit cards," Ms. Aydin said.

But beyond the downturn, no matter how severe, is the reality: the religious wealthy class is powerful now in Turkey, a new phenomenon that poses fresh challenges not only to the old secular elite but to what good Muslims think about themselves.

Money is at the heart of the changes that have transformed Turkey. In 1950, it was a largely agrarian society, with 80 percent of its population living in rural areas. Its economy was closed and foreign currency was illegal. But a forward-looking prime minister, Turgut Ozal, opened the economy. Now Turkey exports billions of dollars in goods to other European countries, and about 70 percent of its population lives in cities.

Religious Turks helped power that rise, yet for years they were shunned by elite society. That helps explain why many are engaged in such a frantic effort to prove themselves, said Safak Cak, a Turkish interior designer with many wealthy, religious clients. "It's because of how we labeled them," he said. "We looked at them as black people."

Mr. Cak was referring to Turkey's deep class divide. An urban upper class, often referred to as White Turks, wielded the political and economic power in the country for decades. They saw themselves as the transmitters of the secular ideals of [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk](#), Turkey's founder. They have felt threatened by the rise of the rural, religious, merchant class, particularly of its political representative, Turkey's prime minister, [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#).

"The old class was not ready to share economic and political power," said Can Paker, chairman of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, a liberal research organization in Istanbul. "The new class is sharing their habits, like driving Mercedes, but they are also wearing head scarves. The old class can't bear this."

" 'They were the peasants,' " the thinking goes, Mr. Paker said. " 'Why are they among us?' "

Ms. Aydin, 40, who wears a head scarf, encountered that attitude not long ago in one of Istanbul's fanciest districts. A woman called her a "dirty fundamentalist" when Ms. Aydin tried to put trash the woman had thrown out her car window back inside.

"If you're driving a good car, they stare at you and point," Ms. Aydin said. "You want to say, 'I graduated from French school just like you,' but after a while, you don't feel like proving yourself."

She does not have to.

Her father started by selling curtains. Now he owns one of the largest home-appliance businesses in Europe. Ms. Aydin grew up wealthy, with tastes no different from those of the older class. She lives in a sleek, modern house with a pool in a gated community. Her son attends a prestigious private school. A business school graduate, she manages about 100 people at a private hospital founded by her father. Her head scarf bars her from employment in a state hospital.

Her husband, Yasar Aydin, shrugged. "Rich people everywhere dislike newcomers," he said. In another decade, those prejudices will be gone, he said.

The businessmen describe themselves as Muslims with a Protestant work ethic, and say hard work deepens faith.

"We can't lie down on our oil like Arab countries," said Osman Kadiroglu, whose family owns a large candy company in Turkey, with factories in Azerbaijan and Algeria. "There's no way out except producing."

Fortunes were made, forming new patterns of consumption. Istanbul, Turkey's economic capital, is No. 4 in the world on the latest Forbes list of cities with the highest number of billionaires. Luxury cars stud its streets. Shopping malls, 80 at last count, are mushrooming.

"Now, unfortunately, there is a taste for luxury, excessive consumption and comfort, vanity, exhibitionism and greed," said Mehmet Sevket Eygi, a 75-year-old newspaper columnist, who has written extensively about Muslims and wealth.

An Islamic concept called *israf* forbids consuming more than one needs, but the line is blurry, leaving rich Muslims struggling with questions like whether luxury cars can be offset by donations to charity, a central tenet of Islam.

“You have money, but do you buy whatever you want?” said Recep Senturk, a sociologist at the Center for Islamic Studies in Istanbul. “Or should you keep a humble life? This is a debate in Turkey right now.”

Islam requires that the wealthy give away a portion of their income to the poor. In the Ottoman Empire, it paid for everything from hospitals to dishes broken by maids in rich houses.

Donations to Deniz Feneri, one of the largest charities in Turkey, jumped almost 100-fold in the six years ending in 2006, when they topped \$62 million.

Even house designs take charity into account. Mr. Cak described a multimillion-dollar house whose design included an industrial-size kitchen where food was cooked daily and distributed in trucks.

Ms. Aydin, for her part, supports 25 families. The real problem is not finding a place to pray on a busy day out (mall fitting rooms work), but being truly charitable and putting others first when the frenzied pace of life pushes in the opposite direction. She holds onto traditions, like Muslim holidays, tightly.

“The world is changing but I don’t want to lose this,” she said.

Sebnem Arsu contributed reporting.

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