

Turkey's Role Reversals

In Turkey, secularists cling to a decaying old order while pious Muslims lead the way toward modernization. But will the upstarts create a genuinely pluralist new order?

BY MICHAEL THUMANN

ON A SULTRY SUMMER DAY LAST YEAR, THREE Turkish couples, the women wearing headscarves, walked into a café in Arnavutköy, a pleasant seaside quarter of Istanbul. I had seen them drive up in their stylish SUVs, which they left in the hands of parking valets. A table with a nice view of the Bosphorus had been prepared for them, and they sat down and ordered tea and pastries. Soon, two other women entered the café, clattering in high heels, their hair dyed blond, accompanied by their husbands. The only available table was next to the first group, and the blond women made it plain that they did not want to sit next to the observant Muslims. The waiter suggested that they wait at the bar for another table, but the women were impatient. One of them approached the seated group and asked them to leave. They demurred. The blond said, "You have to go. This is not your part of the city." Shouting erupted, and before long both groups left in a huff.

That scene by the Bosphorus revealed the primary fault line in contemporary Turkish society. Some call it

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a clash between Islamist Turks and those with a secular, Western orientation, but that is a distorted picture. Nor is it a conflict between rich and poor. It is more than anything a conflict between a long-reigning, entrenched urban elite and a rising class of newcomers with roots in towns and cities far from Istanbul, whose members happen also to be religiously observant. The elites, who have ruled Turkey for more than 80 years, are gradually losing their grip on its central institutions and its society, and they don't like it.

Headscarves are the emblematic feature of this change. One sees them with increasing frequency on the streets of Istanbul and other cities, and they send the secular-minded old guard into wrathful despair. Yet appearances don't tell the whole story. Islam in Turkey is not so much experiencing an upsurge or revival as it is coming out of the closet. According to a Turkish survey, the proportion of women wearing veils actually declined between 1999 and 2008, from 73 percent to 60 percent, and it is only 43 percent among women between the ages of 18 and 27. What *has* changed is that more women who wear headscarves now want to be part of the cities' public life. Unlike in the past, they go out, they shop, and they spend their free time in cafés. Their headscarves are colorful, flashy, designer



In Istanbul, models prepare to show off the latest in headscarves. Fewer women wear headscarves than before but more of them now do so in public.

made—just one facet of a new consumer culture that revolves around pious Muslims. In shopping malls, boutiques now offer a large selection of fancy silk headscarves and stylish, floor-length dresses. The pious nouveaux riches go to five-star hotels during Ramadan and vacation at resorts on the Mediterranean that offer all the pleasures of secular holiday spots except alcohol. In this and other ways, devout Muslims have asserted a new prominence on the national stage.

For the old elite, nothing could be more horrifying. In Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey's capital, its members

cling to perches in state institutions—the army, the bureaucracy, the schools and universities—that they have long controlled. The cities used to be theirs, with the masses they dismissed as backward and unsecular safely confined to the hinterlands. The rise of affluent, pious Muslims is the most threatening manifestation of a process that began decades ago with the mass migration of “uneducated” and “uncivilized” people to the big cities. Today, a feeling of loss overwhelms the old elite. Some of its members demand a clear physical division of the cities between the religiously observant and sec-

ular people like themselves, while others have withdrawn into the gated suburban communities that have sprouted around Istanbul and other major cities in western Turkey. A 60-year-old translator from an elite family told me, “Now the religious people have money. They drive Mercedes, expand in our neighborhood, and show no respect. . . . In all institutions, people of religious background move up.” She added, “We feel that things are

ple elect the parliament, the unicameral Grand National Assembly, which in turn selects a prime minister, but the government is checked by the president (who is also elected by parliament), the Constitutional Court, the National Security Council, and other central institutions, notably the army, which sees itself as the guardian of the Kemalist legacy and has overthrown or forced out several governments it viewed as threats. It

was assumed that these institutions would remain in the hands of the old elite.

That assumption was severely shaken when the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by former Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdogan, came to power in 2002, and battered further in 2007

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sliding from our hands, and we live with the fear that our children will see a darker future.”

The fading overlords of Istanbul and Ankara are the inheritors of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923 on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and determinedly set the country on a course of modernization. He banished Islam from public life, pushed for education in rural Turkey, imposed a new alphabet, and banned traditional forms of dress, among many other changes, and did nothing to conceal his own zest for such pleasures as alcohol and the tango. At the same time, he violently quelled the uprisings of ethnic Kurds in the country’s east and carried out a brutal population exchange with Greece in which huge numbers of Turkey’s Orthodox Christians and Greece’s Muslims—two million people in all—were driven from their homes and forced across the two countries’ common border. Atatürk’s blend of nationalism and whiskey, xenophobia and the tango, authoritarian education and short skirts, was modern in the 1920s, and it still seems sufficient to his heirs. But in fact, the mantle of modernization has shifted to new shoulders.

Despite its democratic trappings, the Kemalist system was designed to perpetuate Atatürk’s inheritors in power. In its highly centralized political order, the peo-

when voters sustained the AKP’s parliamentary majority, enabling the party to elect Abdullah Gül to the presidency. What would have been an entirely normal step in a Western democracy was seen as a blow against the whole Turkish order, provoking a veiled threat of intervention by the military.

The AKP is conservative, but contrary to critics’ suspicions it is not a religious party. There is not a single word about religion in the party program apart from the kind of laudatory bromides one might find in the platforms of America’s major political parties, and after eight years in power the AKP has not pursued any Islamist objectives, such as establishing laws based on religious sources. Turkey’s Islamists mostly rally to the Felicity Party, which has enjoyed scant electoral success. (Nor has religion been a driving force in Turkish policy toward Israel. Prime Minister Erdogan traveled there to meet Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005 and served as a mediator between Israel and Syria, turning sharply critical of the Jewish state only in 2009, after Israel’s Gaza incursion. While Erdogan has relentlessly exploited his new posture for domestic purposes, notably in the recent Gaza flotilla incident, the shift enjoys very broad support among Turks, including many secularists.) The AKP is a kind of melting pot of devout conservative forces, Turkish nation-



Celebrating Republic Day: Turkey's military, the chief guardian of the secular Kemalist system, no longer enjoys the deep public support it once had.

alists, economic reformers, and pious businessmen. In order to keep these diverse factions together, the party takes a political line that is primarily pragmatic—or, as some critics in Turkey would put it, a pattern of zigs and zags.

In the eyes of the old elite, however, Turkey's 87-year-old commitment to internal Westernization is hanging in the balance. Compromise is therefore rare in Turkish politics, and debates often turn ugly. An attempt to make a minor amendment to the constitution may quickly turn into a battle about the very survival of the Turkish republic. Many in the old guard suggest, however implausibly, that sinister forces in the United States and the European Union have teamed up with the current government in order to “turn Turkey into another Iran,” while others talk of a “civilian coup.”

What is really going on, however, sounds familiar to people in Western democracies with diverse societies. The AKP is installing its supporters in the bureaucracy and other public offices and fighting for their rights and interests, perhaps most controversially by insisting that pious women who wear headscarves be

free to enter universities. AKP partisans claim the same jobs, access to schools, and even concepts—modernity and democracy—that were once seen as the monopoly of the old elite. Remarkably, the AKP has assumed command of Turkey's Westernization drive. It was Erdogan whom the European Union invited to begin membership negotiations in 2005, and Erdogan who led Turkey through a series of far-reaching reforms in pursuit of EU accession.

The city of Kayseri, hometown of President Gül, is a good place to see the ways in which Turkey has changed over the last 30 years. Founded in Roman times, Kayseri sits some 500 miles to the southeast of Istanbul in Anatolia, the high, arid plateau region that is Turkey's traditional heartland. In the city center one still finds the old Sahabiye Madrasa and an 11th-century Seljuk dynasty fortress, but otherwise very little remains of Kayseri's past. The new bus station is a bold experiment in glass and dazzling white concrete. Beyond the station is an enormous industrial



Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has deftly led the AKP's rise but is known for his heated rhetoric and for playing rough with critics in the news media.

zone, with new plants that produce furniture, machinery, textiles, processed foods, and other goods, many of them exported to Europe and the Middle East. Advertising posters encourage people to drink more Cola Turka and to drive more Turkish tractors. Though Kayseri has long been an industrial city, its breakthrough came in the 1980s under Prime Minister Turgut Özal. He invited foreign investors to Anatolia and made loans available to small and medium-sized industrial enterprises. The opening of the economy under Özal allowed the Anatolian middle class to flourish and made the region an export powerhouse.

Saffet Arslan, head of the huge Ipek furniture company, is an emblematic Anatolian success story. He started working in a furniture workshop at the age of 14, soon opened a small cabinetmaking business of

his own, and in 1991 founded Ipek. Arslan, now 52, is as devout a Muslim as he is a capitalist. He funds a school, a sports center, and scholarships for students at the local university. He has been on the haj, the traditional Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, but he is also a hard-driving businessman who takes time for worship only at noon on Fridays, the special day of prayer for Muslims. Ipek's workers are allowed to pray in the factory mosque during their lunch breaks, and on Fridays they all travel together on a short bus trip to the large new Central Mosque of the Organized Industrial Zone, with its state-of-the-art under-floor heating.

Arslan and most of his fellow Anatolian entrepreneurs are an important source of the AKP's support, and some have joined the Erdogan government. The entrepreneurs have a business-driven, pragmatic way of looking at the world. They are devout but treat their faith as a private matter. Likewise, they expect Ankara to stay out of their business affairs and to pursue policies that promote economic openness, with as few trade barriers as possible. But the Anatolians have not been content only to get richer. Seeing their country sunk in decades of economic stagnation and ruled from the center by a

sclerotic elite, they decided in the 1990s that they wanted influence, and they understood that they would need to pursue it with "brains and broadcasts"—in other words, through the universities and news media.

Realizing that it would be all but impossible to penetrate the existing institutions, they started their own. One group of wealthy Anatolians, for example, launched *Zaman*, now an influential daily newspaper that also boasts a news agency, a magazine, and an English-language edition. Another group founded Fatih University, on the outskirts of Istanbul. (The backers of both institutions are followers of Fethullah Gülen, a controversial figure to many Kemalists but, in a broader Middle Eastern context, best understood as a preacher of a mildly conservative Islam.) Most of the roughly 8,000 students at Fatih University—more

than half of them women—come from large and rather conservative Anatolian families who trust the school to enforce their values—no drugs, no alcohol, no classes during midday prayers on Friday. A third of the graduates return to their family enterprises, and while many others go into business, few have penetrated the country's major political institutions.

Despite its internal divisions, Turkey has enjoyed unusual political stability since Erdogan assumed office. His tenure can be divided into two distinct periods. During the reform period, from 2003 to 2005, he pressed Turkey's bid for membership in the European Union by recasting Turkish law to meet EU harmonization requirements—a process that included updating the penal code and amending civil rights laws—and gradually reducing the military's role in politics. The years since 2006, however, have been a period of constant strife that included a thinly veiled coup threat by the army when Gül was elected president in 2007 and an attempt (nearly successful) the next year by Kemalist prosecutors to get the Constitutional Court to close down the AKP for “antiseccular activities.” New tensions have been stirred by the government's prosecution of army officers, journalists, and others it accuses of belonging to a shadowy Kemalist network called Ergenekon, which it suspects of plotting murders, terrorist incidents, and other crimes in order to undermine Erdogan's government. The trials of the accused have not always met the highest judicial standards, but since they began, the occurrence of mysterious incidents has decreased dramatically.

Even as he struggles with Turkey's old elite, Erdogan has embraced some of the long-standing positions of the Turkish state, taking a hard line against Kurdish separatists and clamping down on opposition news media. The nation's largest private-sector media company, Dogan Yayin, for example, was recently fined some \$2.5 billion for tax evasion and other irregularities. With his emotional rhetoric, Erdogan comes across, like most of his Kemalist predecessors, as a dogmatist who does not appreciate criticism. Despite his government's sometimes tense relations with the military, he has worked with the Turkish army, the sacred protector of Atatürk's legacy, even defending the general staff on more than one occasion against fierce attacks from the Republican People's Party, a Kemalist group. During their years in the political wilderness, Erdogan and his political associates bitterly resented the

centralist system set up by the Kemalists. In office, however, they have learned to like it. The man from the periphery has clearly arrived at the center.

But in Turkey, the center is precisely the problem. From the prime minister's office in Ankara, the country looks, in political terms, completely flat—a landscape with few features to check the exercise of power. The state's extreme centralization has resulted in a system in which bureaucrats in Ankara appoint teachers in remote villages and fix the price of hazelnuts. The inordinate power lodged in the country's major institutions makes even modest political and social changes difficult and contentious. In September, Turks will vote in a referendum on a package of constitutional reforms crafted by Erdogan and the AKP majority in parliament. The package includes some needed changes, but they stop short of addressing Turkey's crippling political centralism, leaving the seeds of authoritarianism embedded in many institutions and rules.

In such a diverse country, it is remarkable that so few powers have been devolved to the regions. A 2004 law gave Turkish municipalities the same powers as European ones, at least on paper. But local governments do not have revenues to match their responsibilities, and elected mayors seeking to make use of their meager powers must contend with provincial governors who are appointed by the central government. The centralism is self-reinforcing: Regions that lack self-sufficient local government perform lack strong representation in the capital to push for local interests.

Allowing more political flexibility away from the center would relieve some of the strains in Turkish society. Empowered local authorities in the Kurdish east, for example, would have the tools to work toward improvements in the Kurds' economic and cultural life, while in the rich, Kemalist-dominated regions in the west, secularists would regain a sense of control over their own destiny, easing the war of the two elites.

In a Middle East dominated by authoritarian governments, Turkey stands out for its embrace of democratic procedures. But if Turkey is to flourish, it must go further and embrace pluralism in its national life. Now, under the leadership of politicians who bow, in their personal lives, to Mecca, it has the opportunity to take this important step. ■