

# CLIMBING THE GREASED POLE: TURKEY'S ISLAMIC DEMOCRACY

T

RELIGION HAS BEEN PART OF THE BATTLEGROUND OF POLITICS IN TURKEY FOR DECADES, BUT THE STRUGGLE OVER THE ISSUE HAS RECENTLY TAKEN A NEW FORM.

---

---

BY *GEORGE S. HARRIS*

he Turks have been wrestling with their identity and the place of Islam in public life since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the new state in 1923. The architect of replacing the worn-out Ottoman Empire with an energetic new republic, he pointed Turkey firmly toward the West.

For Atatürk, Islam represented the dead hand of the past. By enshrining secularism in the Constitution, he

---

*George S. Harris is currently an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., carrying out research on Turkey and the Middle East. From 1957 to 1962, he was a political attaché in Embassy Ankara. He then returned to Washington, D.C., to work in the Office of National Estimates as an estimator until 1974, when he joined the Bureau of Intelligence and Research within the Department of State. In 1978 he became the bureau's director of analysis for Western Europe; the following year, he was appointed INR's director of analysis for Near East and South Asia. He retired from this last State Department position at the end of 1995.*

*In addition to numerous articles on Turkey, he has written several books, including *Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Historical Perspective, 1945-1971* (1972) and *The Communists and the Kadro Movement: Shaping Ideology in Atatürk's Turkey* (2002).*

sought to make sure that Islamic practice would not stand in the way of Turkey's modernization. During his lifetime he resolutely prevented the construction of any new mosques in the capital, Ankara. And all Islamic religious officials were, and continue to be, supervised and paid by the Turkish government. In his zeal to make Turkey a developed nation, Atatürk even investigated the possibility that Protestantism's work ethic, following the teachings of Max Weber, might energize the Turks to progress more rapidly, as it had done in Western Europe.

Since Atatürk's day, however, the pull of religion has made itself felt ever more strongly in Turkey. Over time, the secularism of the nation's civilian elite became diluted as new recruits from the periphery who increasingly took pride in their Islamic identity joined their ranks. By the 1990s, civilian politicians seeking to use religious appeal to succeed in politics were even able to form a ruling coalition.

The military establishment, by contrast, remained fiercely committed to Atatürk's secularism, a divide that has increasingly set the generals apart from the civilian politicians. The military took power directly twice, in 1960 and 1980, and its veiled threats brought down a civilian government for appearing to exploit Islam for political purposes as recently as 1997. It also encouraged Turks to demonstrate in defense of secularism in 2007.

But while the generals remain a potent factor in political calculations in Turkey to this day, they are constrained in exercising power by their recognition that ruling by fiat would generate strong domestic resistance. A military coup would also powerfully disrupt the country's course toward membership in the European Union, a relationship that they strongly desire. Hence, instead of taking action on their own, these days they merely invite the civilian politicians by indirection (proclaiming that their views are so well known that they do not have to be repeated) to oppose what the military leaders consider violations of secularism.

While the senior generals seem united in their view of Islam, the civilian camp is not. Cosmopolitan European influences dominate in the major cities and in the developed coastal part of Turkey that has long been a favorite tourist destination, with its beaches where topless bathers do not heed Islamic strictures on public display. Yet in the poorer sections of the large cities, migrants from the villages observe traditional dress and customs, with the mosque playing an increasing role. And even in Ankara, Atatürk's stricture against building new religious edifices has fallen away; Friday prayers in scores of new mosques are attended by many tens of thousands.

Central Turkey, including such cities as Konya, Kayseri and Gaziantep, is home to the "Anatolian tigers," emerging economic powerhouses based on clothing manufacture, construction and other industries. Their owners are associated with the modernizing movement led by Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen, who seeks to adapt Mohammad's teachings to the current day and stresses contemporary education and the harmony of the three Abrahamic religions. This well-funded, moderate religious current, with its many high schools, forms the backbone of support for the ruling Justice and Development Party (generally known by its Turkish initials, AK).

Finally, the eastern region of Anatolia is populated both by highly conservative Sunni Kurds and secular-minded Alevi Turks and Kurds. The latter groups tend to shun mosques and, quite unlike the Shi'ite Iranians next door, back secular parties — particularly those who claim descent from Atatürk's own political organization.

*Among other things,  
the AK Party  
appears to stand for  
greater scope for the  
practice of Islam.*

Religion has been part of the battleground of politics in Turkey for decades. But recently the struggle over religious issues has taken a new form, especially after the victory of the brand-new AK Party in the 2002 parliamentary elections. This party is led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a former popular mayor of Istanbul who had been jailed in 1998 for referring to minarets as "bayonets of the faithful."

Among other things, the party appeared to stand for greater scope for the practice of Islam.

Because of the vagaries of the Turkish election system, the AK Party took just over 60 percent of the seats in Parliament, even though it only received about a third of the total vote in 2002. That result came about because nearly half the ballots cast nationwide were discarded, having been marked for the 16 secular parties that did not exceed the required 10 percent of the national vote needed by any individual party to elect deputies. Thus, the AK's victory was not a majority movement in favor of a religiously oriented party.

Moreover, polling shows that much of its support reflected disappointment with decades of rule by secular parties, which were seen as guilty of corruption and unable to provide effective government. The new party seemed especially attractive because Erdogan, as mayor of Istanbul, had run the largest city in Turkey efficiently and honestly.

**Slow but Steady Wins the Race?**

The party's leaders clearly understand that much of their support comes from devotees of good government, so until recently they have moved quite slowly along a religious course. In fact, on the eve of the 2007 elections they purged a third of their deputies for appearing too conservative. Such tactics, and Turkey's unusually strong economic performance under its stewardship, appeared responsible for increasing the AK Party's share of the national vote from 34 percent to 47 percent.

Recent polling data provide additional insights into why the party has moved only slowly to change secular laws. When asked their opinion of Shariah (Islamic religious law), some 21 percent of Turks say they favor its adoption in place of the present secular codes. But when pollsters went on to ask whether a man should be per-

## FOCUS

mitted to have more than one wife at a time, as Shariah would allow, only 6 to 7 percent agree. And when asked whether hands should be cut off for stealing or adulterers should be stoned — punishments Islamic law mandates — only 1 percent of Turks support such extreme measures. Clearly, many Turks either do not really understand what adopting Shariah would mean or believe they would be able to tailor its requirements to the Turkish environment.

### **The Headscarf Controversy**

Turkish women have enjoyed equal rights with men before the law since Atatürk's day. To replace Islamic law, he introduced Western legal codes that have remained in force ever since. But he did not stop with merely changing the rules of the game. He saw to it that women exercised the right to vote and were elected to political office. Under his encouragement women entered the National Assembly, became judges, and served as university professors as early as the 1930s. Yet it took until the mid-

1990s for a woman, Tansu Çiller, to become a party leader and prime minister. Moreover, while urban women have generally taken advantage of their secular opportunities, many rural women remain bound in tradition.

At present all major parties nominate women to run as deputies; and even the religiously oriented AK Party saw the number of its female candidates elected to Parliament in the last election rise to 26, double the total five years earlier. Today, roughly a tenth of Parliament is made up of women.

But while the political fortunes of women thus far in Turkey might suggest that they are gaining in rights, there is a strong current of concern in feminist circles that, in fact, the pressures on women to conform to traditional Islamic practices are rising. One of the main foci of this concern is the headscarf issue (known as a "turban" in Turkey), which secular Turkish women often consider the nose of the camel under the tent. They worry that the entire beast will eventually force its way in, and that all women will be forced to conform to Islamic practices.

## *THE REMINGTON*

**Per diem accepted all year round**



***2 Blocks to Main State Department  
Rent by Day, Week, or Month***

- One bedroom fully furnished condo
- Deluxe full size kitchens
- Washer/Dryer in unit
- Free private phone line/local calls
- Free cable w/ premium channels
- Free weekly maid service
- Parking available
- Pets accepted
- Free internet access in the lobby



**601 24th Street, NW • Suite 102 • Washington, DC 20037**

**Tel: 202-223-4512 • Fax: 202-452-9541**

**E-mail: [reservations@remington-dc.com](mailto:reservations@remington-dc.com) • [www.remington-dc.com](http://www.remington-dc.com)**

Thus, the course of the headscarf controversy is an important measure of how the religion issue is evolving in Turkey. The headscarf was a new form of Islamic observance when it was introduced in Turkey in the 1980s. At the end of that decade, a law was passed forbidding women to demonstrate attachment to Islam by wearing a head covering that conceals all their hair in university and government buildings.

Indeed, in a somewhat sensational incident after the 2002 elections, one female member of the newly elected AK Party's parliamentary delegation attempted to wear a headscarf to the swearing-in ceremony at the National Assembly. She was physically prevented from taking her seat. Yet although AK Party leaders gave the impression during the 2002 elections that they would end or at least relax the ban, they took no action during their first term in office.

Then, in April 2007, the time came for the election of a new president. Abdullah Gul, the head of an observant Muslim family, was going to stand for the position. In an attempt to head off his election, the military leaders engineered large street demonstrations in Ankara and Istanbul in favor of secularism. Then, during the National Assembly's voting process, the Turkish Constitutional Court ruled that the necessary quorum was not present to permit the presidential vote to continue. The main complaint against Gul was the fact that his wife, Hayrunisa, always wears an Islamic-style headscarf. But after the July 2007 national elections returned the AK Party to power with an even larger majority, a quorum was secured and Gul was successfully elected president. The generals, their bluff called, took no action.

Although the headscarf ban is dear to the military establishment and to many Turks, the AK leaders then proceeded to lift it, with support from the Nationalist Movement Party, an ultra-nationalist organization, which got the third-largest number of votes in the last election. This returned the situation to where it was 20 years ago, when women's hair was permitted to be covered, but veils and burkas were not allowed. Polls show that there is not much support for allowing such veiling in Turkey today. But again, the move to permit the headscarf is stirring up opposition, ensuring that the issue will remain a live one in

***The course of the  
headscarf controversy  
is an important  
measure of how the  
religion issue is  
evolving in Turkey.***

Turkish politics.

Tellingly, the Turkish first lady has been very careful to be discreet and not lead the challenge to secularist practice, however. Meanwhile, the top generals have seemingly repaired relations with the AK Party over this matter. Whether those two developments constitute a tradeoff, explicit or implicit, or are merely coincidental, it appears that there has been a significant diminution in the power, if not the inclination, of the military establishment to involve itself in politics.

This may be because any flexing of political muscle by the generals would impede Ankara's already shaky bid to join the European Union. E.U. membership is something both secularists and proponents of Islam wish would happen, although for different reasons. The devotees of Islam see membership as a guarantee of freedom of religious activity and assurance against military intervention. However, given the reluctance of the Europeans to see Turkey with its large Muslim population enter, membership is not likely to come about in the next decade, and some doubt it will ever take place.

**The Kurdish Conundrum**

A major test for the AK Party government is whether its Islamic appeal for unity can prove stronger than the separatist current within the Kurdish community, particularly in the traditionalist eastern part of the country, and thus overcome the divisiveness that has troubled Turkey in recent decades.

By the end of the 1970s, a small radical Kurdish terrorist organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (known by its Turkish initials as the PKK), began to foment violence against the regime. Led by Abdullah Ocalan, it operated outside the tribal structure and espoused the cause of broader independence for Kurds in eastern Turkey. After Ocalan's capture in 1999, he called for an end to ethnic violence. Accordingly, there seemed a chance that the PKK would turn into a political party and use the electoral system to seek greater political rights, rather than pursue outright independence.

Unfortunately, that course has not been followed, and in the past few years Kurdish violence has resumed. The danger exists that a tit-for-tat mentality could arise where

## FOCUS

PKK strikes would trigger disproportionate military reactions, which would, in turn, feed a culture of violence without end.

But on the level of the political parties, a certain degree of optimism reigns. The 2007 elections showed the AK Party winning just over 50 percent of the vote in the east, reflecting a possible decrease in separatist sentiment among the Kurdish population. The rest of the Kurdish vote was split.

Significantly, the PKK has not retained the support it used to enjoy because other Kurdish organizations are increasingly popular. Supporters of Nakshibendi dervish organizations and ultra-conservative outfits, including Kurdish Hezbollah (which translates as “The Party of God”), have gained ground. These other groupings of Kurds are critical of violent incidents fomented by the PKK that have caused collateral damage, such as the recent bombing in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city in eastern Turkey, in which Kurdish students, rather than the targeted Turkish military, were killed.

### **A Model for Others**

Given all this, what can the United States do to help bolster Turkey’s Western orientation, and is there any way to help it become a model for other Islamic regimes? To take the second question first, Turkey is not well positioned to serve as a beacon for other Islamic nations. Its Arab neighbors still nourish a feeling of reserve produced by the maladministration of the Ottomans and a conviction that modern Turkey has become too subservient to the West. These states are not encouraged to copy the Turkish experience when they see the many hoops Ankara has had to jump through to join the European Union. Nor does American support improve their inclination to follow in Turkey’s wake.

In the past, among the Arabs only Tunisia’s Habib Bourguiba was known as an admirer of Ataturk who sought in any way to emulate the Turkish Republic. But the current leaders of Tunisia lack his standing, should they seek to copy Turkey’s system. In another part of the Muslim world, the Pakistani generals have looked to the

# Home Suite Home



The next time you’re going to be in DC for an extended stay, make yourself at home at Georgetown Suites. With our discounted monthly rates and large, comfortable suites, you’ll feel right at home. Plus we’re near the State Department. Call today!

## **Georgetown Suites**

[www.georgetownsuites.com](http://www.georgetownsuites.com)  
[sales@georgetownsuites.com](mailto:sales@georgetownsuites.com)

**the fun place to stay in DC** 1-800-348-7203

Turkish military establishment and its role in politics to justify their efforts to monopolize power. But they have not sought inspiration from Turkey to create a moderate Islamic democracy.

Recently, Turkish-American relations have been volatile and stressed, reflecting Ankara's anger with President George W. Bush for risking the destabilization of the Middle East through the invasion of Iraq, as well as U.S. failure to move against PKK sanctuaries in northern Iraq. To alleviate these strains, and reinforce Turkey's Western orientation, the Bush administration should:

- Broker serious cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq against PKK bases there;
- Encourage more foreign investment in Turkey by American multinational corporations;
- Step up the education of Congress on the harm to U.S. interests from resolutions alleging genocide against the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire; and
- Continue America's strong support of Turkish entry to the European Union. Our focus should be on persuading

opponents, particularly French President Nicolas Sarkozy, not to block further negotiations looking to eventual Turkish accession. At the same time, we should encourage the Turks to meet all E.U. human rights criteria.

How far will the AK Party go in shading Ataturk's concept of secularism? For the moment, at least, it is likely to rest on its laurels. Its leaders, after all, are moderates and lack any interest in restructuring Turkish democracy in basic ways. Hence, if the military maintains its disapproving but distant posture, as appears quite likely, the government will probably be able to accommodate the recent changes, which it can sell as expanding freedoms.

The party's popularity will in significant measure continue to be built on its fostering of economic success. Its challenge will be to show that unlike all previous Turkish regimes, this one can keep advancing for more than two election cycles without sinking into corruption or losing momentum. Islamic practice itself will thus probably not be the determinant of the regime's ultimate staying power. Good governance will. ■



**HOME IS A FEELING, NOT AN ADDRESS.**

At Marriott Execustay® we'll find the perfect furnished space to fit our guests' needs and complement their lifestyles.

- Flexible rates within federal per diem
- Fully furnished apartments for stays of 30+ days
- Earn Marriott Rewards® points for the entire length of stay.

Call 800-735-7829 or visit [execustay.com](http://execustay.com) to reserve a stay with us.



**Choose From More Than 100 Furnished Properties Throughout D.C. Each Different and Unique**



**ATTACHE  
PROPERTY  
MANAGEMENT LLC**

**Our Fully Furnished Properties Feature:**

- **Wireless Broadband Internet, Cable With Two Movie Channels**
- **HDTV, DVR and/or TIVO Service in Several Properties**
- **TDY Per Diem Rates Accepted**
- **Studios to 4-Bedroom Houses**
- **Locations in Foggy Bottom, Dupont Circle, Georgetown and More**
- **All Major Credit Cards Accepted**

**View photos, exact locations and rates at:**

**[www.attacheproperty.com](http://www.attacheproperty.com)**

**Tel: (202) 787-1885**

**Attache Property Management LLC-  
Accommodating Your Furnished Housing Needs**