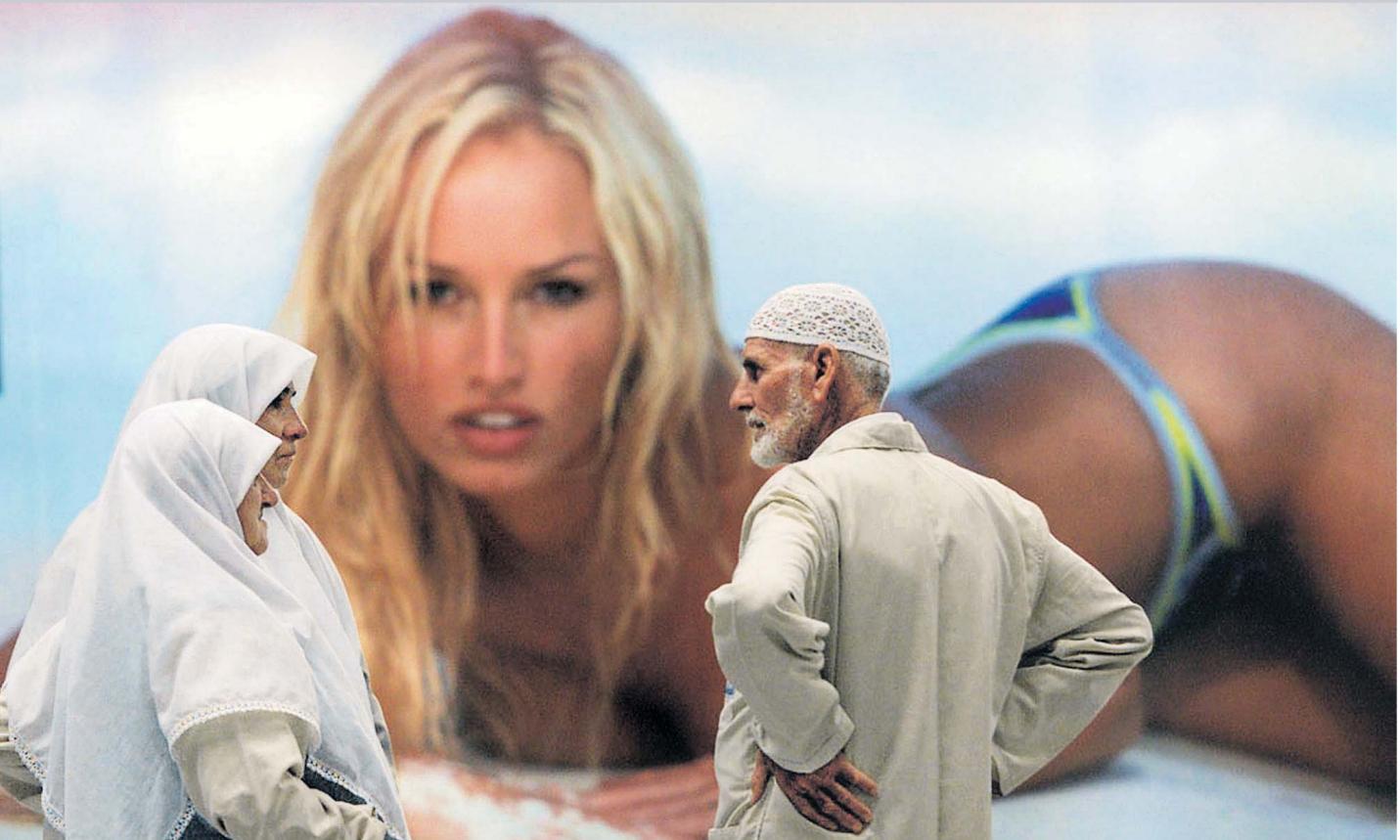


**ELECTIONS** The stakes could not be higher in tomorrow's Turkish polling. There has been serious talk of a military coup, an invasion of Kurdistan is possible and many fear the ruling party has a secret agenda to bring in sharia law.



One country, two worlds: Muslims gather near a billboard advertising a Turkish internet company at Istanbul Airport.

PICTURE: REUTERS

# Old versus the new as Turkey finds its way

By **JAMES BUTTON**  
ANKARA

**H**USEYIN Kalayci was teasing his sister-in-law, Iraz, that in Turkey's election tomorrow he was going to vote for the ruling Justice and Development Party, the so-called Islamists. Her anger surprised him.

"She's a very modern girl," he says, gesturing to show she wears tops that reveal her shoulders. "She's atheist, she eats pork, she has a good job. And she thinks the AKP (Justice and Development Party) is going to ban alcohol, maybe make her wear a headscarf. I think it's crazy. I'm a leftist, I also live in a very European way, but I have no problems with the AKP."

The 37-year-old political scientist from the Turkish capital Ankara, won't vote AKP. But he does not believe, as many Turks do, that it has a secret agenda to create an Islamic state. What Kalayci dislikes is that the party "is too neo-liberal. They privatise everything."

Still, he praises it for trying hard to get Turkey into the European Union and for huge reforms relating to the position of women. Yet "secular people refuse to believe the AKP could make these changes. There is too much paranoia in Turkey."

To understand Turkish politics, take all the usual political labels and reverse them. A government often described as moderate Islamist — it prefers conservative democrat — promotes rights for women and tries to open the country more to the world.

A one-time left-wing party — the Republican People's Party, or CHP — accuses its conservative opponents of being soft on terror, and invites the army to invade northern Iraq to crush the terrorists. Many CHP members, and even some feminists, take to the streets and call on the army to protect Turkish secularism.

The stakes could not be higher. The poll follows a constitutional crisis over the election of the next president and anti-government rallies of a million people. There has been talk of a coup. The army has massed 140,000 troops on the northern Iraq border and an invasion is possible. As the vote nears, the country is bedecked in red national flags and awash with conspiracy theories: a best-selling book claims that devout Muslim Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a Jew. And the source of all the heat, ostensibly, is a headscarf.

In April, the AKP nominated its foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, for the presidency, and prepared to use its parliamentary majority to elect him. Three days later, at midnight, the general staff of army chief Yasar Buyukanit posted a letter on the armed forces' website warning against "undermining the republic, especially secularism".

The army, fierce guardian of the secular state created in 1923 by Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, is appalled that Gul's wife, Hayrunnisa, wears a Muslim headscarf. Moreover, it and much of the secular elite fears that the AKP's securing of the presidency would complete its takeover of key state positions, triggering a slow but irreversible move to sharia law. The headscarf is the fault line of politics. For a president's wife to wear it threatens what secularists call "Islamisation from the head".

In Turkey, messages from the army matter. A similar warning in 1997 triggered the collapse of a government dominated by the Islamist Welfare Party, forerunner of the AKP. It was the fourth military coup since 1960. But this year, the Government did not buckle. Instead, it served a reminder that the army took its orders from the prime minister. Already election favourite, it surged to 42 per cent in the polls as people seemed to condemn the army.

The consequences of this potentially seminal moment reveal the historical forces shaking Turkey.

It is Sunday and at the AKP's headquarters in the central city of Kayseri, Aykut Itekin is watching a Turkish comedy on TV during a break from campaigning. The 36-year-old party vice-chairman is wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. His wife, like many women linked to the party, does not wear a headscarf. He runs a business selling fitness equipment, "though I need to work on this", he says, patting his stomach. He does not look like a man bent on imposing sharia law. Nonetheless, he is a devout Muslim. "For us, work that creates jobs is an act of prayer," he says.

Murat Cingi, an election candidate who runs a furniture company, says he is forever being interviewed by foreign journalists about the phenomenon of "Islamic Calvinism". He does not mind the label, though he says Muslims have always done well in trade. "Remember, the Prophet was a businessman."

Whether credit belongs to Islam, or just the Turks' famous capacity for hard work, in 40 years Kayseri has gone from being one of Turkey's poorest cities to perhaps its richest. It has 700,000 people and 750 companies. One did a deal with Levi Strauss and now makes 1 per cent of the world's denim. Another expanded from a small carpentry workshop to become the country's largest furniture business, worth \$A1.36 billion.

The economic miracle across Anatolia, Turkey's heartland, has happened so fast that sons of peasants who could not read are sending their children overseas to study. Dr Ibrahim Kalin, of Ankara's SETA think tank, says that is changing Turkey.

"Kids coming out of these small places . . . are going to New York or London to be educated. When they come back, Istanbul and Ankara suddenly look small, and they think, 'How can you claim to be the elite?' They don't have an inferiority complex any more."

Only five years old, the AKP is part of this phenomenon, says Kalin: a party to represent a new class. It provokes derision in the best Istanbul cafes. Yes, Erdogan is charismatic, but he's common. Look at how he eats, with one hand. As for Gul, he made a traditional Muslim marriage to a 15-year-old girl, 15 years his junior! On the surface the talk is about religion, but really it is about class and expresses a division that goes back to the birth of the nation.

Ataturk set Turkey on what his biographer Andrew Mango calls "a forced march to modernity". Every reform — from abolishing religious courts and polygamy to introducing Latin script and giving women the vote — was done in the name of Westernisation and against what he saw as the backwardness of Islam.

Yet although Ataturk created Turkish democracy, he was not at heart a democrat. His revolution was a project of the secular elites, who turned their faces to Europe, producing an existential desire to belong to the West that has never gone away. Meanwhile, they turned their backs on the illiterate Muslims of Anatolia. But one day the "black Turks", as the elites call them, would knock on the door.

In 1945, just one in four Turks lived in cities. By 2000, it was two-thirds of a population of 73 million. The rural poor came in search of work, creating the forest of soulless tower blocks that ring Turkish cities. Erdogan's father was one of them.

A severe, strictly religious man, he migrated to Istanbul and captained ferries on the Bosphorus. His son attended a strict Islamic school and sold food on the streets of a rough neighbourhood before he obtained a degree in management, played professional football and went into a food business. In 1994, he became mayor of Istanbul for the fiercely Islamist Welfare Party, representative of the city's newcomers.

Erdogan saw politics as a tool of his religion. He tried to close brothels and banned alcohol in

cafes run by the city. But after the 1997 coup destroyed the Welfare Party, Erdogan seems to have rethought his position. When the Islamists split in 2001, he went with the moderates. By the time the AKP took power in a landslide a year later, he was a changed man.

If, as expected, the AKP wins a strong majority, it will be because it has deftly managed a booming economy. Foreign investment soared to nearly \$A22.8 billion last year, more than in all the years from 1980 to 2000.

More surprisingly, the AKP embarked on democratic reforms. It trimmed the army's powers and made concessions towards a united Cyprus. But the greatest change came for women.

When the mass of Anatolian peasants moved to cities, their wives, out of economic need, started working. And their daughters went to school. From these changes came a new kind of Turkish feminist, not Western, usually wearing a headscarf, but no less militant.

"I've lived here since 1992 and I can tell you that some of the most aggressive feminists in Turkey wear the headscarf," says Amberin Zaman, a Turkish-Bangladeshi woman who writes from Istanbul for *The Economist*. She sees groups of organised, veiled women "go into other women's houses and say, 'Don't let your husband beat you or say you can't vote.'"

It was such women who pushed the AKP to introduce its remarkable penal code, a recent European Stability Initiative report found. The 2004 code establishes family courts and strengthens girls' access to education. It ends lesser sentences for honour killings and repeals a law under which a man could not be convicted of rape if he agreed to marry his victim.

Turkey is still no female paradise. It has fewer women at work (28 per cent) and in Parliament (4.4 per cent) than any European country. There were more than 1000 honour killings between 2000 and 2005. Yet the report says that "for the first time in its history, Turkey has the legal framework of a post-patriarchal society".

It is true it made changes as part of its bid to get into the EU. Critics who say there is a hidden Islamist agenda accuse the AKP of practising takfiye, a concept that allows the faithful to lie to promote Islam. Erdogan proposed making adultery illegal then backed down. Some AKP mayors have banned alcohol and introduced segregated sporting facilities. But is there really a secret plan to introduce sharia?

Baskin Oran is a hero of the Turkish left, a Marxist politics professor who is running as an independent candidate on a human rights agenda. If anyone should fear the rise of a reactionary Islam it is him.

Oran is dismayed that the AKP has not moved to prevent the rising number of prosecutions of people for the crime of "insulting

Turkishness" — the case of Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk being the most famous example. Yet he thinks the idea the AKP "is Islamist is baloney". Rather, it represents emerging capitalists, whose attraction to the profit motive will force their faith ever further into private life. Money, Erdogan has proclaimed, "has no religion".

To Oran, what makes the AKP more progressive than other parties is that it is the least nationalist: its supporters' core allegiance is to Islam. While Turkish politics stews in nationalism, they are bypassing it, "going straight from feudalism to globalisation".

Oran's analysis helps to explain why the party is more keen on the EU than on Turkey's rigidly secular state. Gul's wife, Hayrunnisa, even took a case to the European Court of Human Rights, charging that the ban on headscarves in universities prevented her from studying (she later withdrew the suit so as not to embarrass her husband).

This ban outrages AKP leaders, and they may try to fight it. On the presidency, they are likely to be more conciliatory for now: Erdogan knows Turkey is not ready for a president whose wife wears a veil.

But Europe could also hurt the AKP. Its effective rejection of Turkey's EU bid is fuelling what Oran calls "rocketing nationalism".

This year, the Kurdistan Workers Party, which has run a protracted insurgency in the south-east, has increased attacks from bases in northern Iraq, killing up to 10 Turkish soldiers a week. Both the far-right MHP party and the CHP party, which is close to the army, have called for an invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Government has been forced to join the clamour, with Gul announcing that invasion plans were ready to go.

The army is watching intently. A skilled political player, it would never step in if it felt that so doing would hurt its standing, says Eytan Macupyan, of leading think tank TESEV. But lately, it has moved troops to the border without consulting the Government. Macupyan believes that if it did invade, its main reason would be less to destroy the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) than to exploit the crisis to reassert its grip on domestic politics.

Yet Semi Idiz, a columnist with centre-right newspaper *Milliyet*, does not believe the army would dare intervene against the popular will. Equally, Islamising Turkey would require "a Spanish Civil War" and will not happen.

He thinks Turkey's future is "more of the same": more modernisation, more economic actors, a rough road towards more democracy. "As much as the Kemalists (rigid secularists) and the army might wish otherwise, the genie is out of the bottle now."

James Button is Europe correspondent.



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his wife, Emine, greet supporters at an election rally.

PICTURE: AP



Australian Government  
Department of Families, Community Services  
and Indigenous Affairs

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The Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) is calling for eligible non-government organisations (NGOs) to apply for funding to build their capacity for delivering respite services.

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- the new Respite for Older Carers of Children with Disability initiative, which provides funding of \$270 million over five years to assist those aged 60 years and over who are caring for children with disability aged 25 years and over.

The application package is available on the FaCSIA website at [www.facsia.gov.au/mentalhealth](http://www.facsia.gov.au/mentalhealth) or by calling the New Funding for Respite Services application hotline on 1800 733 413.

The hotline is available from Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm AEST (Australian Eastern Standard Time) commencing on Monday, 9 July 2007.

Applications close at 5pm AEST on Friday, 3 August 2007.

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