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Awaiting Pope, Turkey Is Unsure About Ties to West

By Sabrina Tavernise

ANKARA, Turkey — A short 24 hours before a visit by Pope Benedict XVI to this Muslim country, its prime minister finally agreed to meet him publicly. The venue: the airport, on the Turkish leader's way out of town.

The elaborate, last-minute choreography pointed to the deep divide that has festered within Turkish society since the foundation of the modern state. Should Turkey face eastward, toward its Muslim neighbors, or westward, toward Europe?

In the past five years, Muslims here have repeatedly felt betrayed by the West. The United States began holding Muslims without charges at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. It invaded Iraq and abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The European Union has cooled to them. The pope made a speech citing criticism of Islam.

Now, Turkey — a Muslim country with a rigidly secular state — is at a pivot point. It is trying to navigate a treacherous path between the forces that want to pull it closer toward Islam and the institutions that safeguard its secularism. Turkey's government, which is pro-Islamic, is constrained by rules dictating secularism established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's revered founder.

The extremes jostle on Istanbul's streets, where miniskirts mix with tightly tied headscarves and lingerie boutiques stand unapologetically next to mosques.

"There are two Turkeys within Turkey right now," said Binnaz Toprak, a professor of political science at Bosporus University.

The pope's visit, which begins Tuesday, falls squarely on that sensitive fault line and has brought into stark relief a slow but steady shift: Turkey is feeling its Muslim identity more and more. The trend worries secular Turkish politicians, who believe the state's central tenet is under threat. In late October, a senior officer of Turkey's army — which has ousted governments it has seen as overly Islamic — issued a rare warning to that effect.

Others say the threat is overstated, but acknowledge that Turks do feel pushed east by pressures on their country from America and Europe. A poll by the Pew Foundation in June found that 53 percent of Turks have positive views of Iran, while public opinion of Europe and the United States has slipped sharply.

"Many people in Turkey have lost hopes in joining Europe and they are looking for other horizons," said Onur Oymen, an opposition politician whose party is staunchly secular.

It has been more than 80 years since religion was ripped out of the heart of the new Turkish state, which was assembled from the remains of the Ottoman Empire, the political and economic heart of the Muslim world for centuries. But the portion of Turks who identify themselves by their religion, first and foremost as Muslims, has increased to 46 percent this year, from 36 percent seven years ago, according to a survey of 1,500 people in 23 cities conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, an independent research organization based in Istanbul. That is a trend that has emerged in countries throughout the Muslim world since Sept. 11, 2001.

“I’m here as a Muslim,” said Fatma Eksioglu, who was sitting on the grass next to her sister in downtown Istanbul on Sunday at a demonstration of about 20,000 people opposing the pope’s visit. She did not belong to the Islamic party that organized the gathering, she said, adding, “When it comes to Islam we are one.”

But in a paradox that goes to the heart of the nuances of modern Turkey — a stronger Muslim identity does not mean that, as in Iraq, fundamentalism is on the rise. or even that more Turks want more religion in their government. Indeed, the number of Turks in favor of imposing Sharia law declined to 9 percent from 21 percent, according to the survey, which was released last week.

Perhaps the most powerful factor pushing Turks toward the east has been a series of bitter setbacks in talks on admission to the European Union. To try to win membership, the Turkish government enacted a series of rigorous reforms to bring the country in line with European standards, including some unprecedented in the Muslim world, such as a law against marital rape.

But the admission talks have stalled. And while the official reason is a quibble involving the longstanding Greek-Turkish dispute over Cyprus, most Turks say they believe the real reason is a deep suspicion of their country’s religion.

They see that in the opposition to Turkey’s admission voiced by some European countries, including Germany, Austria and France. Indeed, in 2002, , former President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing of France said Turkey’s admission to the European Union would mean “the end of Europe,” and now the French presidential hopeful Nicholas Sarkozy has made his opposition a campaign issue. Even the pope, when he was still a cardinal in Germany, said publicly that he did not think Turkey fit into Europe because it was Muslim. That talk has begun to grate on Turks.

“It hurts me that the E.U. expects Turkey to be something it’s not,” said Nilgun Yun, a stylish 26-year-old chewing a chocolate muffin in a downtown Istanbul cafe on Sunday.

Her position, shared by many of her friends, was simple: “Accept me as I am. We are Muslim, and we will remain Muslim. That’s not going to change.”

Mr. Oyman, the Turkish opposition politician, said that talk about Turkey was tougher than ever. “You cannot believe how they accuse Turkey on Cyprus and other issues,” he

said in a telephone interview from Brussels, where he was attending a meeting of European parliamentarians. "Our European friends are playing a very shortsighted game."

The shift has begun affect trade. While Europe is still Turkey's largest trading partner, business with other neighbors, including Syria, Iraq and Iran, has picked up substantially in recent years, said Omer Bolat, the head of one of the country's largest business associations, whose members are mostly pro-Islamic. He put the growth at about 30 percent from just 3 percent in 2000.

"It is risky for a country with respect to foreign policy to have dependence on one partner and market," he said in English, sitting in a sleek conference room when overlooking a bustling trade fair showcasing Turkish goods. "Now Turkey is opening its muscles, its horizons."

The policies of the Bush administration have deeply worried Muslims, he said, before rushing off to speak to the Pakistani ambassador, who had arrived to the trade fair.

"The United States used to be paradigm of freedom and rights," he said. "But since the Republican period, the U.S. policies have been so detrimental in Muslim eyes."

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, in just four years, has managed to get inflation down to historic lows and growth rates to all-time highs. The growing prosperity has eased integration of religious Turks into the country's self-consciously society, which is still suspicious of advocates of Islam, as well as of Mr. Erdogan and his pro-Islamic government.

"This group of people that was more religious has relaxed," Ms. Toprak said. "They are now visible. They go to restaurants they would never have gone; they go to posh shopping malls."

"It was a struggle to get a piece of the pie," she said. "Now they have one."

Even so, the increased religiosity, or at least identification with religion, could eventually present a serious problem for Turkey. There are already rumblings. A killing of a judge whose court had ruled on a headscarf case aroused suspicions among Turkey's secularists. Gen. Yasar Buyukanit, head of the Turkish Army, has referred to a rising threat of fundamentalism on at least four occasions since he came to office in late August.

Mr. Erdogan's closely watched government has attempted to limit liquor consumption in public places, but later backed down. It also tried to make adultery a crime, but later relented.

Some Turkish officials play down the possibility of real damage to secularism, but say that European suspicion does Turkey no good.

The delay with Europe, for instance, “fans up the disappointment, the disillusionment,” said Namik Tan, the spokesman for the Turkish Foreign Ministry. “People say, why are they doing this?”

That is why public officials, including Mr. Erdogan, have shrunk from the visit of the pope, who symbolizes, in the eyes of Turks, a disdain for Islam and the unfair exclusivity of the Western club. A cartoon in a Turkish newspaper last weekend showed two public officials belly-laughing at the bad luck of those Turkish officials obliged to meet him. (The senior official appointed to be his formal guide has the portfolio of youth and sport.) But the pope is coming, and the meetings are happening. Despite growing pains, a neglected Kurdish minority in the south, a thin skin for any reference to the Armenian genocide, and failure to scrap a law that makes insulting Turkishness a crime, Turkey stands out as lively democracy in a larger Middle East riddled with restrictions, and its acceptance by the West is a test case for everyone, officials said.

Muslim countries, Mr. Tan points out, are watching. “Turkey is a beacon for those countries,” he said. “Don’t forget, if we fail, then the whole dream will fail.”

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