

After 16 years of Erdogan rule, Turks are less religious

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After more than 16 years under a government led by a party with roots in political Islam, Turks are less religious today than in the past, a new study indicated.

A survey by the Konda research and consultancy company has ignited debate about the effects of an Islam-inspired government on society.

The poll, which compared views on various lifestyle aspects among Turks today with those from 2008, said 51% of respondents described themselves as “pious,” compared to 55% ten years earlier. In the same decade, the figure of those asked who said they were atheists or “without belief” rose from 2% to 5%.

Konda’s findings suggest that an increasing number of Turks, while still conservative and religious, said they feel less bound by Islamic rules, are more aware of women’s rights and more tolerant of different religious views.

The percentage of people defining themselves as “religious” — as opposed to “pious” — rose from 31% to 34%. About 45% of survey participants said they were “traditional conservative,” up from 37% ten years ago. The number of Turks defining themselves as “religiously conservative” fell from 32% to 25%.

While about 67% of Turks today said they follow fasting rules during Ramadan, the figure was more than 75% in 2008. The percentage of Turks insisting that a woman must have her husband’s permission to get a job fell from 69% to 55%, the poll stated. Also, 40% of respondents said their bride or groom could be of another faith, up from 30% in 2008.

“The result of Islamism is the escape from Islam,” Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, commented on Twitter.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan achieved power in November 2002, it has faced accusations that it wants to turn Turkey’s secular republic with a Muslim majority population into a country ruled by Islamic laws.

The AKP, a party founded as an off-shoot of an Islamist group, denied the charge. It said it has merely abolished laws and regulations discriminating against observant Muslims — such as a ban on headscarves in public institutions — that were introduced before it took over.

Selim Sazak, a US-based Turkey analyst, said the Konda poll reflected “a typical case of reaction-reaction,” given the way the AKP has ruled the country. “The more you impose a social agenda on the people, the more they react against it,” Sazak said via e-mail.

The AKP has overseen the rise of a new Muslim elite. Female government ministers in headscarves have become the norm, as have speeches by politicians peppered with religious references. Critics say public displays of Muslim piety have become an important career move for politicians and public servants.

Observers said one of the reasons for the Konda results is that Turks are disillusioned by public demonstrations of piety by people accused of arrogance and corruption.

Sazak said the AKP’s “very public pursuit” of Islamisation “made political Islam’s contradictions too apparent in the public eye.”

He pointed to the public persona of Erdogan, an observant Muslim who is fiercely proud of his lower-middle-class background. However, he lives in a 1,000-room presidential palace in Ankara, is accused by critics of having amassed huge wealth and oversees extravagant menus at state receptions, where guests drink dragon fruit smoothies and eat ginger and salmon sushi.

“What’s happening now is that a growing segment of the Turkish society is comfortable with renouncing religion alongside religious politics,” Sazak said.

Commenting on the religious aspects of the Konda poll and other religious issues is not without risk for Turkish scholars. Cemil Kilic, a theologian and high school teacher, said on Twitter that he was fired from his teaching job following a campaign by Yeni Akit, an Islamist newspaper, that presented him as a “teacher against religion.”

In a Twitter post, Kilic said atheism and deism — a belief that God created the universe but does not influence events on Earth — were on the rise in Turkey. “This rise is especially strong among children of conservative families,” he wrote, adding that actions by Turkey’s state authorities for religion, activities by Islamic sects and “policies by the AKP” were among the reasons for the development.

Ihsan Eliacik, a maverick author and theologian, has emerged as one of the leading government critics in the context of Islam. Eliacik is the spiritual leader of a movement depicting itself as a group of anti-capitalist Muslims arguing that the AKP is selling out Islamic values by embracing capitalism.

“Even in the lifetime of the Prophet, inequality was a problem,” Eliacik said at a recent workshop in Istanbul on “Islam and the Left,” in which anti-Erdogan Muslims and leftist intellectuals explored ways to cooperate despite a long history of enmity.

“Concerns of the left — about workers, about the downtrodden, about equality — are not alien to Islam,” Eliacik said.