

## Hair Today, Prime Minister Tomorrow

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Articles & Testimony

**T**urkey has nearly a year to go before it holds elections, but one outcome seems certain: the country's next prime minister will wear a moustache. Over the past two decades a streak of hair between the nose and upper lip has gone from a sign of manhood to a class symbol. Until the early 1990s, almost all Turkish men had one, whereas today the moustache belongs to those only in the lower-middle and working-class neighbourhoods known as varos. These concrete-heavy boroughs unattractively encircle all of Turkey's cities, monuments to a period of massive industrialisation and urban migration. Although Turkey is progressing into a middle-class nation, the varos for now hold the bulk of its voters. Next July, Turkey is likely to select a prime minister out of the varos, just like incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a moustachioed tough guy from Istanbul's Kasimpasa neighbourhood. Cab drivers love Erdogan. As one put it recently: "Erdogan looks like one of us."

Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, called the AKP, reached office in 2002, and its long tenure lies more in Erdogan's ability to connect to the varos than any Islamist ideology. The AKP has twice carried elections, getting up to 47 per cent of votes, despite polls showing only 15 per cent of Turks support Islamism. Turkish politics adheres to a simple rule: wives and their moustache-wearing husbands like moustache-wearing men as their leaders. The Turkish prime minister not only looks like a man from the varos, but also walks and talks like one -- for instance, cursing on TV whenever he likes.

That's why it seemed like a small revolution this May when the opposition Republican Peoples Party dumped its clean-shaven and upper-middle-class-looking leader, Deniz Baykal, amid a sex-tape scandal, and replaced him with bureaucrat Kemal Kilicdaroglu, a varos man with whiskers. For the first time since 2002, the AKP faces real competition: Kilicdaroglu can relate to the varos in ways his predecessor couldn't.

Kilicdaroglu's party is climbing in the polls and events are tilting his way. This summer has been marred by violence carried out by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which western capitals label a terrorist group. Turks are upset with both rising Kurdish nationalism and the AKP's failure to keep them safe. Kilicdaroglu, an ethnic Kurd who shuns Kurdish nationalism, could earn points as a Turkish Obama, vowing to bridge the ethnic divide. To this end, Kilicdaroglu must "promise increased freedoms for all the country's inhabitants," says columnist Asli Aydintasbas, and embrace Turkey's bid for EU accession, which the AKP abandoned due to Islamist tendencies.

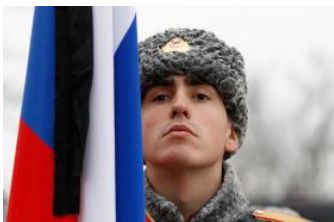
Turkey, finally, has a chance to elect a non-Islamist leader well positioned to rejuvenate the country's crucial efforts to join Europe. Sometimes a little hair can make a big difference.

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