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Turkish women

Thou shalt not kill

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The mosques at last proclaim a woman's right to live

A SHARP new message will soon be delivered to the 15m men who gather every Friday in mosques all over Turkey to imbibe the latest spiritual guidance, on anything from foreign policy to personal cleanliness, from the country's state-appointed prayer leaders. Worshippers will be told that "honour killing"—the murder by men of female relatives deemed to have besmirched the family's moral standing (for such heinous crimes as going to the cinema with a man who is neither husband nor kin)—is not just a breach of the law. Such acts are also a sin against God, the preachers will say: they contravene the Prophet's teaching on clemency.

The idea of using Muslim sermons to stamp out one of most grisly practices of traditional society, of which dozens of cases still occur every year, belongs to Ali Bardakoglu, the new head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate. This is a state institution which reflects Turkey's paradoxical mix of official secularism and popular piety. Its job involves micro-managing religious life and telling preachers what to say.

The directorate's new emphasis on protecting women has cheered western-minded Turks. When the current mildly Islamist government came to power, liberals and feminists feared that this powerful agency might start pedalling backwards. But Mr Bardakoglu amazed women's groups by seeking their help in penning a homily in time for International Women's Day on March 8th; and the stark warning against "honour killing" is among the results. "It's revolutionary," says Halime Guner, of Flying Broom, one of the movements consulted by Mr Bardakoglu.

There have been other nice surprises for liberals. Earlier this month, parliament approved a draft law banning discrimination against homosexuals; it is working on another which would make crimes committed in the name of family "honour" as severely punishable as any other. Some of Turkey's staunchest westernisers grudgingly admit that, since coming to office in 2002, the ruling Justice and Development Party has done more than its secular predecessors to advance social reform. This is at least partly because Turkey's rulers want to join the European Union, which makes social change imperative.

Not all Turkey's advocates of secularism are satisfied that the ruling party has changed its spiritual spots. Some western-minded civil servants grouse that they are being sidelined in favour of men whose wives cover their heads, Islamic-style. But on that issue there are cries of discontent from other quarters—including the women whose headgear bars them from setting foot in schools, universities or government offices.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister, has promised the country's powerful and strictly secular generals that he is in no hurry to assert the right of women to wear headscarves in public places. In another sop to them, he has quietly decided that no ladies in scarves will represent the ruling party in safe seats in next month's municipal elections. That will dismay his more devout female supporters. But, as Mr Erdogan knows, in these matters you cannot please everybody all at once.

AFP



Erdogan and the missus