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## Turkey

### Schools for trouble

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#### A row over an education bill has opened old Turkish fissures

HE WAS educated to be an imam. Yet Recep Tayyip Erdogan instead became prime minister of Turkey, which prides itself on being the only secular republic in the Islamic world. Pro-secular Turks now worry that hordes of similarly-trained students may rise to top positions and put the country on a more Islamic path. By making it easier for graduates of state-run religious schools known as *imam hatips* to enter secular universities, a new education bill has deepened those fears—and prompted accusations that Mr Erdogan is increasing Islam's role in public life.

In Turkey, the status of religious schools is not just a matter for academic debate: it goes to the heart of the the country's secular status, of which the army is a zealous guardian. Tension rose when Mr Erdogan ignored a warning about the draft bill from the chief of the general staff, General Hilmi Ozkok—and used his parliamentary majority to ram the bill through.

Secularist fears were fanned when the European Union's envoy in Ankara, Hansjörg Kretschmer, intervened in the debate; he berated the general for meddling in politics. Professors, students and other activists took to the streets, urging Mr Erdogan to back down. Even impartial observers say the bill's timing was bad. In recent months, Mr Erdogan has won plaudits at home and abroad for constitutional and legal reforms that will groom Turkey for the EU. He scored even more points for inducing the Turkish-Cypriots to endorse a UN plan for Cyprus (which was rejected by Greek-Cypriots). The odds are that, in December, Turkey will get its longed-for date for the opening of EU entry talks.

So why couldn't Mr Erdogan have waited until next year to tinker with the ultra-sensitive issue of religious sechools? Some say that praise from Europe and his party's victory in March's local elections have swollen Mr Erdogan's head. Or he may have faced strong pressure from his pious constituents—after shelving other pre-electoral pledges, such as his vow to ease curbs on the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in state-run establishments.

Mr Erdogan says that all he is doing is redressing an injustice inflicted on *imam hatip* students in 1999, when the army insisted they be barred from admission to universities other than theological faculties. In a bid to appease conservatives, the government then extended a similar discriminatory regime to other state-run vocational schools. As a result attendance at both vocational and *imam hatip* schools has fallen sharply, even though many parents choose them for their discipline and quality, not their religious nature. At the Tevfik Ileri Imam Hatip school in Ankara, there is little sign of the Islamic militancy feared by secularists. Boys and girls mingle freely. Besides studying the Koran, they learn the same subjects as they would in secular schools. Like most teenagers, they spend their free time watching rock music on television or surfing the internet.

Abdullah Gul, Turkey's foreign minister, says discriminating against such schools could prompt parents to send their children to radical, underground establishments. "Government control over religious education eliminates that risk, it is the best guarantee for secularism," he adds. The bill lets vocational-school graduates compete equally everywhere, and *imam hatip* graduates to do so in certain fields. "The claim that *imam hatip* students will flood the universities and go on to become governors, judges and diplomats is nonsense," fumes Huseyin Celik, the education minister. The real reason for the opposition, he argues, is that the bill undercuts the Higher Education Board, a body created by the generals in 1980.

The Turkish president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, is likely to veto the bill in the coming days. Should parliament approve it again, he may then appeal to the constitutional court for an annulment. Now that Mr Erdogan has proved his point, some supporters hope he will pull back from the brink and concentrate on other reforms that will do more for Turkey's EU membership bid.