

Turkey's new class of Muslim politicians

By Helena Smith

ANKARA: Turkey's new leaders are working hard. At all hours the lights burn bright at 202 Ceyhan Atif Kansu street, the very modern headquarters of the governing Justice and Development party (AKP).

When most of the rest of Ankara is asleep, the women in headscarves and men in sharp suits who share this office block are still labouring over computers.

This week has been no exception. At a time when matters of state have been dominated by parliament's rejection of a resolution that would have allowed 62,000 US troops to be deployed here — a refusal that has put unprecedented strain on relations with America — few at the AKP have had a spare moment even to roll out their prayer mats.

Four months after it swept to power, the Islamic-leaning government has been assailed by a succession of great tests, of which the Iraq crisis is just one. It has been forced to confront profound questions about the role of religion in modern democracy: whether the country looks west or east, its relations

with Washington and Europe, and human rights.

In the constitutionally avowedly secular Turkey, many still regard the religious-minded ruling party — crafted out of the ruins of two religious groups previously banned by the army-dominated establishment — as distinctly suspicious.

But from the AKP's first day in office, both it and its image-conscious leader, Tayyip Erdogan — previously banned from becoming prime minister, but apparently on course for the office after Sunday's byelection — have been under intense scrutiny, both at home and abroad.

Will Turkey's new rulers transform the Muslim country, as they have pledged, into a thoroughly modern state, so proving that democracy and Islam can co-exist — or is the snub to the US proof that they mean to destroy the constitutional divide between mosque and state introduced by the republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk?

Few have forgotten how Necmettin Erbakan — the founder of political Islam in Turkey and Mr Erdogan's mentor — was ousted by the army

when he was deemed to have overstepped the mark as prime minister in 1997.

The drama over the deployment of US troops has only added to the sense that Turkey's new leaders are both inexperienced and riven with dispute.

But the overwhelmingly anti-war Turkish population also believes that their parliament's shock vote is the best indicator so far that they have come a long way as a democracy.

Even if they do stand to lose \$15bn in American aid, Mr Erdogan is enjoying 68 per cent popularity ratings. And the withdrawal of aid now seems increasingly unlikely. On Wednesday, the army voiced unexpected support for the US proposal, raising the prospect that a new motion could be soon put to parliament by a newly-elevated Mr Erdogan.

Most analysts say that, as the first party to win a parliamentary majority for 15 years, the AKP has brought the same sense of urgency and determination to its modernizing Islamic policies as it has to its handling of the crisis over Iraq.

And, so far, the novice politicians — elected mainly from

impoverished Anatolia — have shown no signs of harbouring a "hidden agenda" as opponents claim.

"Previous Turkish governments only worked under pressure, and if they did anything it was usually cosmetic," said Mensur Akgun, a political science professor at Istanbul's University of Culture.

"This one seems to be very sincere and is beginning to do something different... in many of its policies it is more secular than the so-called secular parties."

Unlike Mr Erbakan, who looked east as soon as he won office, enraging secularists with visits to Iran and Libya, Mr Erdogan has embraced the west.

He toured EU capitals in the first visits after the AKP's election victory.

He may have started off as a hardliner, telling his followers that it was impossible "to be a secularist and Muslim at the same time", but now a day rarely passes without him publicly distancing himself, professionally, from his religion.

"We did not establish our party as a party based on religion," he told the Guardian. Ankara.

"They have realised that the Kemalist notion of the state — which does not leave much space for the political realm and the tremendous power of the army — will be eroded with the liberal idea of human rights, democracy and rule that forms the basis of the EU."

Such modern ideas, he said, had not only given Turkey's religious hardliners the legitimacy they craved after 1997, but also the security to build a coalition with other forces.

"What we are seeing are the demands of the EU and pro-Islamic groups in Turkey overlapping for the first time in Turkish history, with Islamic groups finding in the west an ally that can protect them against the excesses of the Kemalist state," said Dr Dagli.

Whether the AKP will be able to create a fully democratic country with a Muslim identity — an achievement that would have profound effects beyond its borders — it is still too early to tell. But there is growing consensus that the party is increasingly coming to terms with its changed identity.

"They are in the process of

not only shaping their new identity, but realising the implications of their new language and the capabilities of their new identity to govern Turkey," said Dr Dagli.

Turkey was once the seat of the Caliphate, which headed the world Muslim community for most of the last millennium. Some analysts now believe that Turkey could fulfil Mr Erdogan's dream of becoming a role model both for the Middle East, and for the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union.

In Arab nations where much of the population is young and increasingly disenchanted, Turkey's new government could prove that it is possible for religious leaders to adopt a new language and identity.

"In Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran and Egypt," said Dr Dagli, "there are people who are very disaffected but can't do much about it on their own... They must somehow work with the forces of globalisation to overcome the political repression and economic backwardness they feel at home. In many ways the AKP has done just that." — *Dawn/The Guardian News Service.*

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