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## Turkey's PM stirs controversy over choice of 'national drink'



If you are looking for one sure way to split public opinion in Turkey, just bring up the word alcohol.

That is what Turkey's often divisive prime minister did late on Friday when he pronounced that the national drink was not beer, nor the aniseed spirit raki - choice tippie of Turkey's founding father - but the non-alcoholic yoghurt drink ayran.

Given the setting of his speech - a symposium on global alcohol policy in Istanbul - Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's comments appeared far from controversial, but so sensitive is the topic that the mere mention of it by the pious leader, known for his dislike of alcohol, has Turkey's secularists up in arms.

During the single-party rule of the Turkish Republic's early years by what is now the country's main - and staunchly secularist - opposition party, state promotion of alcohol amounted to propaganda, Erdogan said.

"Beer was unfortunately presented as a national drink. However, our national drink is ayran," he said, referring to the staple lunchtime refreshment of yoghurt, water and salt, usually swilled down with a meaty kebab.

"There is no way you can defend as a lifestyle the consumption of alcohol which has no benefit to society, but on the contrary inflicts harm," Erdogan continued.

No sooner had he made his remarks, broadcast live on television, than social media lit up with derisive comments symptomatic of the gaping divide between Turkey's conservative Muslims on the one hand and secularists on the other.

"It's true, all of you drink ayran with your pasta inside your mosques," read one comment directed at Erdogan's official Twitter account.

"We take example from our FOREFATHER who drank our National Drink: raki," the message continued, referring to Turkey's founder, soldier-statesman Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was often photographed with a glass of the anisette spirit in hand.

"Erdogan, will you do a shot of ayran with me?" taunted another user on Twitter, while others lamented the prime minister's intrusion into their lives: "What's it to you what the nation drinks? You go drink ayran. Leave me alone."

## Secular unease

Behind the jibes lies a deeper unease among Erdogan's opponents who say his government, which has its roots in political Islam, is eroding the secular foundation of modern Turkey, not least through its policies on alcohol.

Erdogan's government has imposed some of the highest consumption taxes on alcohol in the world, and under its tenure an increasing number of municipalities have imposed restrictions on drinking in public as well as on national advertising.

Most recently it banned alcohol sales on all domestic and some international flights of its national carrier.

The government says it is not attempting to interfere in people's lives and is simply trying to bring the country up to European norms by controlling alcohol sales and protecting the younger generation as it negotiates to enter the European Union.

But unlike Western countries, which also impose restrictions, Turkey does not have an alcohol problem. Only six percent of Turkish households consumed alcoholic drinks in 2008, down from eight percent in 2003, according to the Betam research centre at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University.

For many Turks it is simply the prime minister's authoritarian style they have an issue with. Often brusque in manner, Erdogan can come across as a stern father, also lecturing people on the dangers of cigarettes and even suggesting how many children families should have.

But in a country where Erdogan has dominated politics virtually unchallenged for the past decade, his word is final. Shares in Turkey's top listed dairy producer Pinar Sut, which makes ayran, rose 3 percent shortly after Erdogan's remarks.