# Turkish Secularists Back in Charge:

## Outlook and Opportunity

by Alan Makovsky **(/experts/alan-makovsky)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Having won his parliamentary vote of confidence Saturday by a relatively comfortable margin, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz has set about the difficult task of governing with his ideologically diffuse but all-secular government. The departure of the Erbakan-Ciller government has eased tensions in Turkey, though questions about the future of Islamism and the two former leaders' legal and political futures remain on the agenda. With President Suleyman Demirel's help, Yilmaz might have a chance to unite the secular right, which would probably be the most effective antidote to the ongoing popularity of Necmettin Erbakan's pro-Islamist Refah Party.

The new team. Yilmaz heads a minority government, consisting of his own Motherland Party (MP), former prime minister Bulent Ecevit's left-of-center Democratic Left Party (DLP), and the right-of-center Democrat Turkey Party (DTP), a redoubt of mainly Demirel loyalists who defected from Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (TPP). For its majority, the government relies on outside support from Ecevit's rival, former foreign minister Deniz Baykal and his left-wing Republican People's Party, and over a dozen independents, again mainly Ciller defectors.

How long? Though Yilmaz has said the government will prepare for "early elections," he has not said when those elections will be held. He is likely to want to keep the government in power at least until next spring and possibly well beyond if the government proves manageable and remains popular. The primary benefit of prolonged rule for Yilmaz is that it could redeem his leadership credentials, after two brief and less-than-lustrous performances in the prime ministry in 1991 and 1996, and establish him and his party as the unrivaled leaders of the secular right. This, of course, would depend on his performance in office, as well as on right-wing rival Tansu Ciller's situation. Yilmaz has promised a government of "conciliation," but he has also pledged to ease the process of lifting parliamentary immunity, which would increase Ciller's legal vulnerability. For his own political standing, Yilmaz may have to take care to assure that vindictiveness does not overcome conciliation.

The primary impetus for quick elections comes from the social democrat Baykal, who is convinced that his credentials as a committed secularist have boosted his once-limp public standing. Baykal made his support for the government conditional on its going to early elections, but voters would punish him if he brought down a popular government. Moreover, he might not be able to, since Tansu Ciller and her depleted parliamentary ranks are unlikely

to desire a vote anytime soon. That would leave Baykal alone in the quick-elections camp with Erbakan, not a politically comfortable place to be.

A hybrid government. The government's primary credentials are its secularism and the generally clean image of its leaders, both of which distinguish it from its predecessor. The cabinet is high-quality. Particularly in the realm of economic management, Yilmaz appointed some top talents from the Ozal era; Ecevit chose moderates over radicals for his party seats. Trying to blend left and right, however, the government's economic approach inevitably will be muddled. Radical measures, including on long-promised and badly-needed privatization, are unlikely.

The secularist agenda. It is somewhat ironic that Yilmaz comes to power as the savior of secularism. Though few doubt his personal commitment to secularism, he rules over a party that includes a small but influential Islamist wing to which Yilmaz has often been deferential. Yilmaz avoided taking a position on the 18 anti-fundamentalist demands put forward, at the military's initiative, by the National Security Council (NSC) February 28. And, although he has made the NSC's centerpiece demand for abolition of religious junior high schools an element of his government program, he only endorsed it after becoming prime minister two weeks ago. Moreover, the government program made no reference at all to the NSC's other 17 demands. He has moved quickly to halt disproportional funding transfers to Refah-run municipalities and to appoint secularists to replace Refah-appointed Islamists in the bureaucracy, however. For its part, the military will probably be content with these actions, plus educational reform and readiness to monitor and limit questionable sources of funding for Islamist activity.

Foreign policy and the Ecevit factor. This cabinet marks the return to government of Bulent Ecevit, three times prime minister in the 1970s, then banned from politics for several years, like Demirel and Erbakan, following the 1980 military takeover. Ecevit's career is marked by frequent criticisms of the US and US policy, at times bordering on the paranoid; often he has accused the US of seeking to establish a Kurdish state in Turkey. Immediately upon taking office recently, he told interviewers that Turkey's Gulf War policy had been too pro-US, and he called for friendship with Iran and other bordering states. No doubt at his insistence, the coalition protocol called for a "region-centered" foreign policy—widely understood to mean that Turkey should warm its ties to Tehran and Baghdad rather than defer to U.S. policies.

> The strongly nationalist Ecevit has emerged as a leading foreign policy spokesman for the government. Nevertheless, his more anti-Washington views are likely to be kept in check by the military, the foreign ministry bureaucracy, and President Demirel, all mainly acting through the half-civilian, half-military NSC, and by Yilmaz himself. (Yilmaz ignored the "region-centered" formulation in the government program he presented to parliament.) Ecevit's hard-nosed views on Cyprus, which reinforce some of Yilmaz' own, may be more influential.

> Exercising his constitutional prerogative, Demirel reportedly rejected Ecevit's first choice of a like-minded loyalist for foreign minister and insisted on the more mainstream Ismail Cem, a rare leftist who supported Ozal's pro-U.S. Gulf War policies. Demirel also reportedly had a major say in choosing his own former party loyalist Ismet Sezgin as defense minister, another civilian position represented on the NSC. Demirel, Cem, and Sezgin led the delegation that pragmatically put the final touches on last week's joint statement of principles with Greece.

Yilmaz' opportunity/Demirel's challenge. Erbakan's Refah Party continues to command the support of at least 20% of the electorate. Claiming it is anti-secular, the Turkish state prosecutor is seeking to close the party on constitutional grounds; the verdict in that trial, now in recess, will be announced later this year. Closure of Refah probably wouldn't solve the long-term Islamist problem in Turkey. But two other measures could ameliorate it, however, and both are possibly now within Yilmaz' grasp: electoral reform and unification of the right. Neither are easily accomplished, but each would serve to undermine Refah's most important ally, fractionalization of the secular right. Electoral reform would be meaningful only if it minimizes the impact of parties, such as Refah, that have devoted minority followings but are strongly opposed by the majority. A formula that would satisfy both Yilmaz' secular right and the usually-

less-popular left upon which the Yilmaz government depends would be difficult, if not impossible to find. Yilmaz has discussed such reform in the past but did not mention it in his government program.

Unity on the moderate secular right may soon become a possibility for the first time in years. With Ciller's parliamentary delegation crumbling, her reputation badly scarred, and her political and legal future deeply in doubt, Yilmaz now appears the decisive winner of his long-time rivalry with her. That means Yilmaz, if politically adept, could parlay his position into leadership of a unified right. With his cabinet choices, which include several former members of Ciller's TPP, Yilmaz cleverly seemed to signal that TPP defectors will find a warm welcome in his party. To unite the right, however, Yilmaz will need cooperation from Demirel, who showed uncharacteristically bold leadership during the recent months of political tension. If Ciller's star continues to plummet, Demirel would find few obstacles in his path should he to seek to guide his former True Path Party and its partisans into a merger with Yilmaz' ANAP. That might be painful for Demirel, but, more than any other measure, it would be powerful balm for the Turkish establishment's Islamist concerns.

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