

Erbakan on the Ropes

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Brief Analysis

Atense confrontation between the Turkish military and Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's governing Refah Party may come to a head Thursday, when the Turkish cabinet meets to consider a set of uncompromisingly tough pro-secular measures inspired by the military. There is little doubt the military mistrusts Erbakan and wants to see him out of power; if history is a guide, the military will get its way. The Erbakan government is probably on its last legs.

The standoff began February 28 when the half-military, half-civilian National Security Council (NSC) called upon the Erbakan-Ciller government to adhere to the "democratic, secular principles" of Ataturk and, to that end, to adopt some twenty recommendations. As an NSC member, Erbakan was urged to sign the document and, after several days' dramatic delay, did so. The twenty proposals reportedly include, inter alia: enforcement of neglected constitutional requirements on dress codes and on banning of sufi brotherhoods; reversal of worrisome social and political trends, such as the growth of religious schools and infiltration of Islamists into the bureaucracy; special restrictions implicitly aimed at Refah, such as limits on cash transactions by Islamist groups and acceptance of party responsibility for the "unconstitutional," i.e., anti-secular, behavior of its members; and (in an unmistakable swipe at Erbakan's foreign policy) careful monitoring of Iranian efforts to "destabilize" Turkey. Constitutionally merely an advisory body to the cabinet, the NSC is the agency that institutionalizes a policy role for the military; its will is rarely over-ridden. Taken together, these measures reflect the military's fear that Erbakan and Refah are increasing their grip on Turkey's bureaucracy and institutions and succeeding in a long-term plan to reorient Turkey toward their Islamist vision.

It would be humiliating for Erbakan to implement these measures. By doing so, he would, in effect, turn his back on his own constituency, acknowledge guilt for past behavior, adopt policies based on an orthodox Ataturkist worldview he has long vigorously opposed, and renounce the political Islamic outlook that is his party's *raison d'etre*. A senior Refah official has already said that adoption of all the recommendations would be impossible.

Background. Given their vastly differing worldviews, Refah and the military were doomed to a showdown. Since he took power in June, military brass have repeatedly visited the prime minister to lay down the law: no harm to relations with the United States, NATO, and Israel and, most of all, no damage to the secular Ataturkist state.

Although he frequently incurred the military's displeasure with his statements, Islamist-oriented personnel policies

(including in the police), and private contacts with international Islamic radicals, Erdogan avoided direct challenges to the military for nearly six months. Then-humiliated by agreements with Israel forced upon him by the military and irked by accumulating criticism from Islamists who felt he was selling out the cause-Erdogan became more assertive in mid-December. In an unprecedented affront to the protocol-conscious military, Erdogan boycotted a session of the Supreme Military Council, where he faced the unhappy task of presiding over the military's expulsion of dozens of Islamist officers. Next, Erdogan usurped funds appropriated to the military and established his own discretionary defense fund. Despite military objections, he persisted in bruiting the possibility of "defense industrial cooperation" with Iran; during Iranian President Rafsanjani's December visit, Erdogan's "security affairs advisor" met privately with Iranian defense officials. In mid-January, Erdogan invited some forty tarikat leaders (sufi sheikhs) to his residence for a Ramadan iftar meal-a brazen display of ties with the illegal brotherhoods that flouted all previous norms.

For the military, the breaking point was the late January "Jerusalem night" incident, when the Iranian ambassador and the Refah mayor of a small suburb near Ankara staged an anti-Zionist, anti-Arafat, pro-sharia "pep rally." The mayor was arrested for his anti-regime utterances (and the Iranian ambassador expelled), but Erdogan neither condemned the remarks nor dissociated himself from them. Refah Justice Minister Sevkettin Kazan further angered the military by visiting the mayor in jail. Tension between the military's deputy chief of staff and a Refah minister was palpable (and widely publicized in Turkey) at a mid-February conference in Washington. Then, on the eve of the dramatic February 28 NSC meeting, Erdogan contemptuously denounced the "fascist secular regime" in Turkey.

Political culture in the Erdogan era. The current crisis caps eight-plus months of Refah governance that has created the most political uncertainty and the most demoralized electorate since Turkey returned to civilian rule in 1983. This has been manifest in several ways:

- 1) Increased public cynicism. The government has been sustained by secularist junior-coalition-partner Tansu Ciller's perceived Faustian deal to back Erdogan while he protects her from corruption charges.
- 2) Policy confusion. On a range of foreign policy issues, Turkey has spoken with multiple voices, leaving foreign observers confused. In Washington recently, senior officials from the military, the foreign ministry, and the Refah wing of the government delivered starkly differing messages regarding Iran.
- 3) Lack of leadership from secularist politicians. Although representing some 80% of the political spectrum (and 70% of parliament), Turkish secularist politicians have shown themselves unable to unite to defend secular principles, prompting military assertiveness through the medium of the NSC. As a result, they have provoked many Turks and others to question the vitality of the Atatürkist movement. Over the years, many Turkish secularists appear to have developed a "dependency psychology," convinced that they can avoid hard decisions, since the military will bail out the system if the system falls into crisis.
- 4) High-profile military. The NSC intervention highlights an Erdogan-era trend that has seen the military, both optically and in fact, playing a higher-profile role in Turkish foreign policy and domestic politics than at any time since the military regime of 1980-83. With the message from secularist politicians often muddled, the military's uncompromising statements on secularism and Atatürkism have marked it as the only non-Islamist force in Turkey with a clear vision for the nation's future.

The outlook. Erdogan's prospects are bleak. He can implement the military's emasculating proposals, try to remain in office while delaying full implementation of the recommendations, or resign. The military reportedly wants the measures implemented within one-to-two months and is unlikely to be patient. The wily Erdogan knows the military

is loath to stage a coup and probably thinks he can stall through partial implementation, parliamentary debate, and procedural machinations. But a successful policy of non-implementation by Erdogan would inflict unprecedented loss-of-face on the military, which almost certainly would not allow that to happen.

If Erdogan refuses to resign, the military could bring down the coalition by coaxing Ciller into resigning or convincing a half-dozen or so of her parliamentarians to resign. If all else fails, it could intervene directly. For both foreign policy and domestic reasons, an outright coup is the military's least preferred option. Nevertheless, the possibility should not be dismissed, if Erdogan is defiant and Ciller and her cohorts remain loyal to him. The military toppled three elected governments between 1960 and 1980. Moreover, one of the major restraints on direct military intervention-concern about Western reaction-has been loosened as a result of U.S. Congressional objections to major arms sales to Turkey and the growing chorus of European Union (EU) voices objecting to Turkish membership in the EU under any circumstances.

Erdogan's departure will hardly solve all problems. Barring new elections, the secular establishment would remain saddled with the same gridlocked parliamentary arithmetic that once made the present government seem the least of evils. As before, no government is possible without Refah unless it includes both Ciller's True Path Party and Mesut Yilmaz' Motherland Party, and the leaders of these ideological look-alike parties are irreconcilably bitter enemies. There is talk of a government headed by someone other than a party leader, but so far few plausible names have surfaced. Another possibility is an above-parties, technocratic government to oversee an extended pre-election period, but that might be unwieldy. New elections would not necessarily diminish Refah, and anything less than sure-handed leadership by an all-secular government might actually strengthen Refah's appeal in the next vote. Aware of all of these pitfalls, the Turkish military has chosen to put defense of Atatürkist secularism above all else.

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