

Erbakan's Turkey: An Early Assessment

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Jul 29, 1996

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Brief Analysis

Erbakan's pro-Islamist Refah Party finished first, with only 21.4 percent of the vote, in December 1995 parliamentary elections. Initially shut out of government, Erbakan managed to bring down the minority secularist government and, on June 28, formed a coalition with former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, who has long touted herself as Turkey's staunchest foe of fundamentalism but now seems primarily bent on halting corruption investigations parliament initiated against her this spring. Refah is Erbakan's third pro-Islamist party, two earlier versions having been banned following military takeovers of the government. The idea of forming such a party was first urged upon Erbakan in 1969 by a prominent sufi (Nakshibendi) shaykh.

Outlook. Turkey's first-ever Islamist prime minister, Erbakan is tactically a pragmatist, but strategically an ideologue. To stay in power, he is willing to compromise in the short run. Notwithstanding three decades of consistently anti-Western and anti-Zionist (and anti-Semitic) pronouncements, Erbakan initially will not challenge fundamental Turkish policies affecting relations with the U.S., NATO, and even Israel, because he lacks leverage to do so. The powerful National Security Council (NSC), whose foreign policy recommendations are rarely over-ridden by Turkish governments, is dominated by secularists from the military and from Ciller's secularist True Path party. (Of the NSC's ten members, Erbakan is the only representative of the Refah Party.) In the meantime, Erbakan will try to do what he can through use of the budget, government appointments, the bully pulpit-further to Islamize Turkish society and add an Islamic tone to its foreign policy.

Although the Turkish constitution precludes his saying so openly, Erbakan's long-term goal is almost certainly an Islamic state. He gave indication of this last year when he sought to delete a constitutional provision that prohibits use of religious law as a basis for the legal or political order. Recognizing that he cannot hope to impose an Islamic order while the military remains staunchly pro-secular, Erbakan for now is probably content to encourage ongoing trends making Turkey a more Islamically-conscious society. Over the long term, he believes, even the military will adopt his Islamic vision.

Ciller's role. Although Ciller's party holds several powerful positions, her leverage is undermined by her concern about halting the corruption charges and her consequent lack of a credible threat to break up the government. She

has already accepted populist measures from Erdogan she adamantly opposed in previous governments.

Military's role. The influential military apparently became convinced that the seemingly inept secularist politicians had no immediate governing alternatives; the next best choice, it reasoned, was to let Refah, which had been benefiting from its opposition status, to assume power. With responsibility for governing, the military apparently believed Refah would be forced to make controversial decisions or reverse longstanding positions, thus hurting its popularity. Erdogan, of course, is aware of the potential pitfalls. For its part, Refah, which already has been pursuing populist policies (such as a budget-busting 50 percent raise for civil servants), may well break up the government and go to new elections in the fall, before the negative impact of its economic measures hits home.

> U.S. policy. The U.S. government has stumbled a bit in its initial dealings with the Erdogan government. The U.S. was correct in warning long-time critic Erdogan that it would be watching his government's "words as well as deeds." Two other statements were less felicitous, however. First, the U.S. welcomed the fact that Turkey had a stable government even before the vote of confidence that confirmed it in office. Some Turks saw that as a U.S. stamp of approval for Erdogan, and, given the closeness of the vote of confidence, the U.S. thus may have inadvertently helped put the new government in power. Second, the State Department spokesman recently said that Turkish commitment to secularism is not a crucial component of U.S.-Turkish relations. This statement has left many secular and pro-Western Turks confused about U.S. intentions.

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The rise of Islamist Necmettin Erdogan to the prime ministership in Turkey does not reflect a sudden or ephemeral shift, but rather deeper and more durable trends in Turkish society. In terms of U.S. policy, there are several issues that should be considered:

First, the success of Refah is as much about nationalism as about Islam. Turkey is in an identity crisis, in terms of both its internal political situation and its role in the international arena. Moreover, public opinion, subject to manipulation by Refah, counts for more in Turkish policy than it did a decade ago.

Second, radical change in Turkey's foreign policy is unlikely in the short term, but possible in the long term. Former Prime Minister Ciller retains the important foreign affairs and defense portfolios, but she is weakened, and it is the military that actually controls those areas. Furthermore, foreign policy takes a back seat to Refah's primarily domestic agenda. At least for now, Refah is concerned more with issues like social welfare and anti-government corruption reform. In foreign policy, Erdogan will pursue a pragmatic policy letting Turkish national interests, above all, guide his policy and try not to antagonize the military. He will tread lightly regarding NATO and Operation Provide Comfort.

> In the long term, however, a number of factors could contribute to a potentially radical and dangerous (from a Western perspective) change in Turkish policy: increased Refah self-confidence, a renewed Refah mandate, or a change in Refah leadership favoring party radicals. (Erdogan is already seventy years old.) Even in the near term, a regional crisis in an emotive area could provoke populist sentiment in Turkey and produce an extreme departure from Turkey's traditionally moderate, pragmatic stance.

>Third, Turkey's problematic relations with its neighbors will not change significantly. Regional frictions will persist and, if anything, worsen.

- Syria -- Considering Turkey's belief that Syria supports the PKK, a rapprochement between the new Turkish leadership and Syria is unlikely; in fact, Refah will probably continue to seek U.S. and allied support for additional pressure on Assad.
- Iran -- Because Turkey sees Iran as one of its regional competitors, Turkey will be reluctant to warm relations

with it.

- Iraq -- Economic incentives will lead the Refah government to favor an opening to Iraq, in line with the attitude of all recent Turkish governments.
- Israel -- Although Erbakan would probably like to end relations with Israel, the delicacy of his relations with the military will prevent any immediate significant change. But Erbakan will be looking for a pretext (such as the recent Operation Grapes of Wrath) for weakening ties with Israel.
- Greece and Russia -- These countries do not have positive impressions of the new Turkish government; given Erbakan's orientation, religious cleavages between them and Islamic Turkey could be a recipe for tense relations.

Fourth, even if Refah's policies are pragmatic in the short term, the new government will affect Turkish relations with the West. For one, Erbakan will reinforce existing Turkish skepticism about NATO and the reliability of its guarantees. As is also increasingly the case with the secular establishment, Erbakan will zealously guard Turkish sovereignty concerns. The major risk to relations between Turkey and the West lies in the possibility of an intemperate reaction by the new government to unanticipated regional crises. Also, with an Erbakan-led government in place, the West unfortunately will be actively looking for evidence that reinforces its perception that Turkey is going bad.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jason Berman.

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