

Islamists Take Power in Turkish Coalition

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Secular Turkey has an Islamist prime minister, at least for now. Turkey's unprecedented coalition government, headed by 69-year-old pro-Islamist Necmettin Erbakan in coalition with heretofore staunch secularist Tansu Ciller, appears to be a compromise that keeps security issues mainly in the hands of the secularists; offers the Islamists dominant responsibility for Turkey's sagging economy and key special-interest and patronage-plentiful ministries; and probably frees junior partner (and former prime minister) Ciller from a series of corruption allegations. Reportedly, the party leaders have agreed on a rotation, in which Erbakan will be prime minister the first year, Ciller the second. For now, Ciller is Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

Like their friends and allies, Turks will wait anxiously for the government's protocol, reportedly to be released tomorrow. With widely differing views on foreign, economic, and social affairs, the two coalition partners are unlikely to accomplish much in office, even if they succeed in their none-too-certain bid to secure a parliamentary vote of confidence.

Who is Necmettin Erbakan? An engineer by training, Erbakan is a former professor and a former president of a key trade and industry group. Although partly schooled in West Germany and once a frequent visitor to Switzerland, he has long opposed Turkey's close ties with the West. Traditionally viewed with suspicion and some fear by Turkey's secularist mainstream, Erbakan is a "hajji" (one who has made pilgrimage to Mecca) and a pro-Ottoman sentimentalist who favors close ties with the Islamic world. He has excepted himself from Turkey's recent criticism of Syria and just days ago received a Syrian mufti, who reportedly tendered him an invitation to visit on behalf of Assad.

> Erbakan entered politics in 1969. He served in three different governments, as head of Turkey's third largest party, in the 1970s. He has twice been banned from politics, 1971-72 and 1980-87, and two earlier pro-Islamist parties he led were abolished following military interventions. Along with Demirel, Erbakan now becomes the second of Turkey's politicians banned after the 1980 military takeover subsequently to rise to the prime ministry. In recent years, he has moderated somewhat the tone and, in some cases, substance of his anti-Western and pro-Islamist pronouncements and adopted a populist message of wide appeal to many of Turkey's underprivileged. His Refah (Welfare) Party has enjoyed remarkable success, improving its vote total in six successive nationwide elections as it improved from 4.4% in 1984 to 21.4% (and a first-ever first-place finish) in 1995.

Erbakan already PM. When President Demirel received his former schoolmate Erbakan and accepted the proposed cabinet list this evening, Erbakan's government immediately took office. That means Erbakan is now prime minister, replacing Mesut Yilmaz, who had been serving in a caretaker capacity since his minority government resigned June 6. Erbakan is the first Islamist prime minister in the 73-year history of the Turkish Republic, virtually founded on the principle of secularism. To remain in office, the new government must win a vote of confidence which could take place more than a week from now. According to the Turkish constitution, the government must present its program to parliament by one week from today (although it could be sooner). Thereafter, parliament must debate and vote on the program with at least three days lapsing between these various stages.

Prospect for confidence vote. The prognosis for the vote of confidence is uncertain. Together, Erbakan's Refah Party (158 seats) and Ciller's secularist, right-of-center True Path Party (129) hold 287 seats. 276 seats constitutes a majority in the 550-seat parliament. Rumors abound of defections from Ciller's party that would rob the coalition of a parliamentary majority; six of Ciller's parliamentarians have already left the party over the past two weeks because of her flirtation with Refah. But there are also rumors of counter-defections to Refah from the religious wing of Yilmaz' Motherland party. The coalition will also probably seek votes from the seven parliamentarians of the religious-nationalist Grand Unity Party, although that party has previously said it would not support an Erbakan-Ciller coalition.

> Upon taking office even before the vote of confidence, Erbakan assumes all executive powers. A good bet is that he will request files regarding Turkish foreign affairs, particularly the Israel-Turkey military cooperation agreement, which he has heatedly criticized. Non-cabinet appointments presumably will require Ciller's consent and will await the vote of confidence.

The bargain. Roughly speaking, the deal is this: Ciller gets "amnesty" and control of foreign affairs. Erbakan gets economic responsibility and attractive patronage-dispensing (and, vote-getting) posts. Those who pay minimal attention to Turkish politics may be stunned to learn that the "iron lady" of Turkish politics, who billed herself as an unswerving opponent of fundamentalism and of its embodiment in the Refah party, who convinced the European Parliament last December to approve a customs union agreement with Turkey for the sake of keeping the fundamentalists at bay, has herself brought the Islamists to power. Ciller will probably plead that she did so only to give Turkey a majority-government after nine months of instability_and then only after proposing various all-secular party coalitions that other party leaders rejected. It is impossible to escape the conclusion, however, that she was merely trying to save her own neck; she faces three parliamentary investigations of alleged corruption, and, though unacknowledged, it is widely believed that an agreement on quashing those investigations was the price Erbakan had to pay to achieve his dream of leading a Turkish government.

> The cabinet is virtually evenly split in numbers: Refah has 19 posts, consisting of the prime ministry, 8 ministries with portfolios, and 9 ministries without. Ciller's True Path Party received 18 posts, 9 with portfolios and 9 without. There are clear trade-offs in the cabinet composition. Aside from the prime ministry, Refah has no foreign policy- or security-related portfolios. Even the interior ministry_which controls the police and which the National Salvation Party, Refah's predecessor party under Erbakan, held three times in the 1970s_went to Ciller's party. In return, Erbakan received the powerful Finance Ministry, which controls purse-strings and also carries responsibility for the economy, and the prime patronage-spawning ministries of Public Works, Labor, and Agriculture. (Responsibility for the troubled economy is a two-edged sword, of course, one that secularists hope will cut Erbakan down to size in the next round of elections, whenever that might be.) While the Education Ministry, much desired by Erbakan for the opportunity to shape young Turkish minds, went to the secularists, Erbakan received the Culture Ministry, which means that he will have meaningful say about which types of cultural pursuits deserve government funding and, consequently, about how Atatürkist Turkey projects its face to the world.

Outlook. Given the great disparity in the viewpoints of the two coalition partners, this government appears unlikely to accomplish much for Turkey, even if it is approved by parliament. In any case, its at best slim majority suggests it will be highly vulnerable to defection and unlikely to last long. Institutionally, it appears Erdogan will have little scope to pursue his oft-touted (and sometimes denied) anti-West, anti-US, anti-NATO, anti-EU, and (never denied) anti-Israel agenda. It is unlikely Turkey will backtrack on formal international commitments. But, unless he has taken a vow of silence, his use of the bully pulpit would likely chill Turkey's relations with many of its traditional and new friends and inflame relations with Greece.

It remains to be seen whether Ciller has agreed to any major pro-religious legislation, but it is doubtful. Efforts to implement Islamic law, which contradicts the secular requirements of the Turkish Constitution, are highly unlikely.

Were Turkey to elect its prime minister directly_as Russia is about to do with its president_a secularist almost certainly would win a run-off. Turkey has been unhappily seeking the right electoral law for nearly fifty years now. It would not be surprising if secularists in parliament, who still hold roughly 70% of the seats, at some point consider the direct-election option as a means of insulating Turkey from future Islamist gains.

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