Turkey and 'The Refah Problem'

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

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Brief Analysis

As Turkey lurches from political crisis to crisis, with only caretaker or minority governments for the past nine months, government instability has begun to affect key parts of foreign policy. Yesterday, for example, the Turkish parliament voted to renew Operation Provide Comfort -- the Turkey-based, U.S.-led multinational military operation to enforce a "no-fly zone" in northern Iraq -- for only one month, rather than the traditional six-month extension. Prospects for even greater change have risen with the possible formation of a new government to include -- or even be led by -- the pro-Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party. Since its last bid to form a government in February, Refah's power and leverage have grown, and the ranks of secularists who outright oppose any Refah presence in government have dwindled. Still, the influential armed forces would object to any Refah responsibility for national security policy. An overt military intervention is unlikely at this point, but behind-the-scenes arm-twisting of secular politicians is not.

Background: Turkey's current woes stem from an inconclusive parliamentary election last December in which Refah (with 21.3% of the vote) barely nosed out two leading right-of-center secular parties, Mesut Yilmaz' Motherland Party (19.7%) and Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (19.2%). In late February, Yilmaz and Ciller formed an ill-fated two-party minority government. Strictly an effort to block the Islamists from power, the coalition brought together two ideological near-twins led by irreconcilable parents. Yilmaz and Ciller openly despised one another before joining forces, and their enmity only increased thereafter, particularly when Yilmaz' party, stunningly, joined the opposition in voting to establish three parliamentary commissions to investigate alleged corruption by Ciller. Incensed, Ciller announced she would join a no-confidence vote against Yilmaz, leading to Yilmaz' resignation two weeks ago.

A coalition partner for Refah? If ideological standards were to prevail, Refah's bid for power would fail; no other large party in Turkey remotely shares its anti-Western, anti-Israel agenda. Other considerations, however, suggest a Refah coalition with Ciller or other secularists is possible. Ciller -- until recently Refah's self-proclaimed firmest foe and, as prime minister from 1993 to 1995, a Washington favorite -- appears to want a deal with Refah, provided the Islamists agree effectively to quash the corruption investigations. A vote today in the parliament, in which Refah joined Ciller's party in narrowly rejecting legislation for a fourth investigation of Ciller, is being widely interpreted as a signal to Ciller that Refah will meet her conditions. Restraining Ciller as she considers coalition with Refah are the damage it would inflict on her political credibility and, more important, the possibility of defections from her party by

disgruntled secularists. (Together, Refah and Ciller's True Path Party have only 14 seats more than a parliamentary majority.) Notwithstanding recent declarations to the contrary, Yilmaz would probably enter the bargaining with Refah if the effort with Ciller fails. (He almost coalesced with Refah in February, before bowing to the wishes of the secular establishment.) The other two main parties in the Turkish parliament are both left-of-center and unlikely to enter a coalition with Refah; neither, by itself, has sufficient votes to give Refah a majority.

Increased ante: If anything, the stakes for Turkey's secular establishment are higher now -- in both policy and political terms -- than they were when Refah unsuccessfully tried to form a government after December's election. In policy terms, the gulf between Refah and the secular elite has widened as Israeli-Turkish relations have intensified in 1996, particularly with a military cooperation agreement signed in late February. In March, President Suleyman Demirel visited Israel, concluding a free-trade agreement and other accords. Refah has a long history of vituperative anti-Zionism -- indeed, anti-Semitism -- and one of its top officials has pledged the party will scrap the Israel-Turkey military agreement "when" it comes to power. Even if Refah were unable to undo Turkey's various agreements with Israel, bilateral relations would be chilled, a development that would be most unwelcome to the Turkish military.

In political terms, three trends, all beneficial for Refah, are relevant:

- Refah has become stronger: Refah has played Turkish institutions like a violin in creating the circumstances that brought down the Yilmaz-Ciller coalition, winning even the grudging admiration of Refah's opponents. First, it initiated the parliamentary investigations into alleged corruption by Ciller. Refah thus drove a wedge between the two coalition partners and deepened the corruption stain on the secularists. Second, Refah successfully pursued judicial action to invalidate the government's original vote of confidence. And, third, the Turkish media declared Refah a big winner in a limited number of local elections held June 2, in which it captured over a third of total votes cast -- adding to a sense of inexorability about its ascent to power.

- Refah's secular opponents have lost credibility: The Yilmaz-Ciller coalition's performance was poor by any standard, mainly marked by unseemly squabbling as economic problems continued to mount. Ciller, in particular, appears to have been damaged badly by the corruption charges.

- Increasing numbers of secular Turks are resigned to seeing Refah in government: These include journalists, academics, and some prestigious businessmen. Some secularists feel Refah has earned a place in government, but most simply believe that forcing Refah to deal with government responsibility in an era of economic difficulties is the only way to dent the Islamists' popularity. Alternative options -- early elections or the establishment of a government that excludes Refah -- would only boost Refah's strength, they believe.

What happens next? Broadly speaking, there are two procedural possibilities -- either a new government will be formed by July 22, i.e., within the constitutionally mandated 45 days after Yilmaz' resignation, or else there will be new elections. But there are also other plausible if somewhat remote possibilities. For example, Demirel can ask any parliamentarian -- not necessarily a party leader -- to try to form a government. If an all-secular government is to be formed without elections, just such a non-party-leader approach will be necessary. While Ciller and Yilmaz clearly cannot work together, parliamentary arithmetic dictates that any majority government that excludes Refah must include both of their parties. Another possibility is that Demirel can assemble an all-party "provisional government" in advance of new elections. Such a government could remain in power a long time; the constitution does not require that the subsequent election be held in a specified period of time. Demirel recently may have hinted at this possibility: Urging politicians to speed the government-formation process, the seven-time prime minister chided them that he "would be happy to form an eighth government, if necessary."

Looming over the entire process is the attitude of the Turkish military, which sees itself as the guardian of Ataturk's

legacy and Turkey's secular, pro-Western course. The military three times has intervened directly in Turkish politics -- 1960, 1971, and 1980 -- and in February reportedly held the shotgun that forced the Yilmaz-Ciller marriage. Both because of its history of intervention, as well as the respect it enjoys among most Turks, the military retains great influence with most secular politicians. Notwithstanding scattered press reports to the contrary, the military almost certainly remains strongly opposed to any meaningful Refah participation in government.

No exit? It is now indisputable that the "Refah problem" -- whether to accommodate Refah or seek extraordinary means to exclude it -- is the dominant theme of Turkish politics. Unfortunately for Turkey, whatever government is formed in the immediate future, with or without Refah, is unlikely to have the wherewithal to deal with pressing political, social, and economic issues, such as 80%-plus inflation. And, barring the unanticipated emergence of a strong, popularly supported leadership, the deeper problems plaguing the Turkish polity -- unstable government and a democratic culture in which leaders seem virtually incapable of placing national above personal interest -- are unlikely to be resolved by a new round either of government-formation or elections. In this turbulent period, the role of President Demirel and of the half-civilian, half-military National Security Council -- a powerful advisory group rarely over-ruled by the government -- will be crucial to providing leadership and continuity on national security issues.

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