

Turkey:

Ciller Moves to Resolve Government Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Prime Minister Tansu Ciller faces a parliamentary vote-of-confidence this Sunday likely -- but not certain -- to win approval for her renewed coalition government. This would be a notable turn-around for Ciller, who has been struggling to assemble a new government since her first government collapsed six weeks ago. In the interim, however, she has managed to redesign an alliance with a former junior coalition partner that permitted passage of critical pieces of legislation, including one intended to widen freedom of expression in Turkey and help achieve Ankara's most important goal: a historic Customs Union with the European Union (EU). If Ciller loses Sunday's vote, her chances to remain prime minister -- and perhaps her party's prospects in national elections currently scheduled for December 24 -- will be in doubt.

Recapturing the Initiative

The recent crisis broke into the open September 20, when Ciller brought down her own government over a stunningly trivial issue -- a demand by the new leader of her coalition partner, the Republican People's Party (RPP), that she fire an Istanbul police chief who had criticized an RPP minister. In so doing, she appeared to have permanently jettisoned her conservative True Path Party's (TPP) four-year-old coalition with the moderate-left RPP, the longest-running government partnership in Turkish history. Her decision reflected inexperience (only five years in politics), a characteristic distaste for compromise, and miscalculation of her ability to form a new government without the RPP.

Ciller's first choice was to form a minority government without coalition partners. This effort was rebuffed when parliament rejected her proposed cabinet on October 15. About to be forced from office, Ciller surprised her opponents by returning to the RPP to reform the original coalition. This time, RPP leader Deniz Baykal raised the ante, forcing Ciller to meet his demand about the police chief, as well as grant more substantive concessions concerning IMF-guideline-busting wage hikes for striking workers.

Ciller's decision to swallow a renewed coalition with the RPP reflects her larger desire to win European approval of Turkey's entry into the Customs Union. Her government negotiated the customs union agreement with the EU in March; if ratified by the European Parliament next month, it would give Turkey the closest economic relationship

with the EU of any non-member state. Forging deeper economic links with Europe is the centerpiece of Ciller's overall program, seen by her as the key to prosperity, to maintaining Turkey's secular, pro-West orientation, and to her own political fortunes. If the European Parliament rejects, or delays, Turkey's accession to the Customs Union, it will be a blow to Turkey's secular parties, particularly Ciller's, and a boost for the anti-West, fundamentalist Refah Party. With Euro-parliamentarians emphasizing human rights reform as a precondition to accession, Ciller turned to the RPP for the Turkish parliamentary majority that would make reform possible.

Governing Without Government:

Without waiting for a vote of confidence, Ciller and Baykal began cooperation on an ambitious program. First, they agreed on early elections for December 24, almost a year ahead of time. Ciller and Baykal thus tied their respective political fates strongly to the Euro-parliament vote on the Customs Union planned for ten days earlier, December 14. They will face an electorate, overwhelmingly pro-Customs Union, which will already know whether they succeeded or failed in their mission. In turn, the December 24 election date could itself enhance prospects for ratification, since many Euro-MPs are sensitive to the electoral-benefit that a refusal to ratify will bestow on the fundamentalist Refah Party.

Last week, with the full cooperation of the RPP, and under the auspices of her caretaker minority government -- the one actually rejected by parliament in October -- Ciller settled a large workers' strike and dramatically won parliamentary approval for three important items: an elections law (in part aimed at the fundamentalist Refah Party, first in most polls over the past year, and designed, through a complicated structure, to limit the number of seats a first-place finisher would win); extending through March the mandate of Operation Provide Comfort, the Turkey-based, U.S.-led multinational military effort to protect the mainly Kurdish population of northern Iraq (and thus taking the renewal of that domestically unpopular operation out of the electoral season); and, most important, reform of Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law, the major focus of Euro-parliamentary concern about freedom of expression in Turkey.

Legislative Reform

Article 8 outlaws "propaganda aimed at the indivisible unity of the state" and has been used to indict more than a thousand and imprison more than a hundred writers who have criticized Turkey's Kurdish policies. As a result of the reform, sentences for conviction under Article 8 have been reduced, many now imprisoned will likely go free, and many current indictments are likely to be dropped. In addition, the concept of "intent" has been introduced, meaning that only those deemed to have actually intended to promote separatism are liable to prosecution.

Although short of the total repeal of Article 8 Ciller originally sought, these changes appear to be significant. Much will depend on how the independent state prosecutor and judges interpret the law. Euro-MPs will closely monitor implementation of the reform and whether Turkey simply turns to other laws -- e.g., Section 312 of the Penal Code -- as a substitute for the old Article 8. Euro-MPs have other human rights concerns in Turkey, but if they judge the Article 8 reform to be substantive, Turkey's prospects for joining the Customs Union -- and Ciller's own electoral hopes -- surely will be boosted.

Democratic Stability Gains:

Because of its unique status as the most democratic state in the Muslim world as well as its history of military interventions, probably no democracy is watched more closely for signs of instability than is Turkey. The current government crisis suggests at least two observations in this regard:

First, the crisis the first of its kind under the 1982 constitution, which until now had seen only smooth government transitions has been handled strictly under civilian auspices and constitutionally-prescribed legal processes. That is a positive sign for Turkish democracy; notwithstanding some inevitable rumors to the contrary, there was virtually

no prospect of military intervention. Even while fighting a bitter war with the PKK, Turkey is now enjoying the longest uninterrupted skein of democratic rule in its history.

Second, one of the tendencies that has most bedeviled the development of democratic culture in Turkey, the propensity of politicians to put personal rivalries ahead of national interest, remains a serious -- though perhaps abating -- problem. The Ciller-Baykal game of chicken caused Turkey to lose more than a month at one of the most important junctures in its history. Had Ciller failed to reform Article 8 for want of a viable government, it would have been because of the chaos she largely brought on herself, and prospects for Turkey's on-schedule entry into customs union would have virtually disappeared. Still, the renewal of the TPP-RPP coalition, even if motivated in part by politics, was an example of pride-swallowing and cooperation that was absent in the 1970s, when rivalry between party leaders helped create the political chaos that led to the 1980 military takeover. Even should Ciller lose Sunday's vote of confidence due to old-style political in-fighting, she will in the meantime have achieved legislative reform necessary to keep the momentum alive for deepening Turkey's historic effort to join Europe and the West.

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