

# Upcoming Turkish Elections: Likely Winners and Implications for Foreign Policy

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## Brief Analysis

On November 3, the Turks will go to the polls to elect their new government. The elections could usher in a major realignment of the Turkish political landscape, perhaps bringing a party with Islamist pedigree -- the Justice and Development Party (AKP) -- to power. Should Washington worry about the foreign policy orientation of a new Turkish administration and its willingness to support a military campaign against Iraq?

## Background

The elections of 1995 and 1999 produced a fragmented parliament in Turkey, with the seats distributed among many parties, including Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's Democratic Left Party (DSP), Mesut Yilmaz's center-right Motherland Party (ANAP), the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), former prime minister Tansu Ciller's center-right True Path Party (DYP), and the Islamist Welfare (later Felicity) Party (FP). Consequently, Turkey has been run by a number of coalition governments with mixed results; for instance, although the country passed a fundamental legal reform package this summer, it is also experiencing its worst economic crisis since World War II.

## How Will the Old Guard Fare?

Recent surveys by Stratejik Iletisim of Ankara, a credible polling institution, show that the current governing parties -- DSP, ANAP, and MHP -- may not even be represented in the next parliament; that is, they may fail to obtain 10 percent of the national vote, which is the threshold a party must reach before any of its members may enter the parliament. In contrast, four current opposition parties are likely to win representation in the next parliament. Two of these are DYP and the center-left Republican Peoples Party (CHP), each of which may garner votes from the many Turks who hold the current government responsible for the ongoing economic slump. DYP is expected to receive around 10 percent of the vote. CHP will likely do even better, perhaps reaching 20 percent, in part due to the recent decision by popular former economic minister Kemal Dervis to join the party.

## Enter the Young Party

The real winners of the elections may well be the new parties, which, in the eyes of the electorate, are not tainted with Turkey's economic and political troubles of the 1990s. One of the surprises of November 3 could be the

nationalist-populist Young Party (GP), a small group that media/telecommunications mogul Cem Uzan literally bought and reinvented in August 2002. Since then, GP has risen dramatically thanks to a campaign rather like that of Italian media baron Silvio Berlusconi, who is now Italy's prime minister. Uzan has used his many business interests to bolster his campaign, including tabloids, television/radio stations, and Telsim, Turkey's second largest cellular phone network -- an effective campaign tool thanks to its phone-based emailing capabilities.

Uzan's message has two main elements. The first is nationalism of the sort that is suspicious of foreigners. Uzan has bashed the International Monetary Fund, blaming it for Turkey's current economic crisis. He has also attacked the European Union (EU), especially its October 9 report in which Brussels snubbed Ankara by refusing to grant it an accession date. Uzan's second main weapon is populism. In large rallies -- about four a day -- he has promised the Turks everything under the sun, including the abolition of many taxes, the establishment of hundreds of new universities, and an acre of land to each family that does not own a house. Such tactics seem to have worked; polls estimate that GP may win as much as 9 to 11 percent of the vote, near the threshold for admission to parliament.

#### An AKP Landslide?

The biggest winner of the elections will likely be the conservative AKP, which was established in 2001. AKP is an offshoot of the banned Islamist Welfare Party, but the electorate sees it as a new force and not necessarily Islamist. Although various secular parties, courts, media outlets, and nongovernmental organizations view the party with suspicion due to its leaders' Islamist past, AKP's moderate, nonconfrontational rhetoric has made it attractive to a diverse array of voters ranging from Islamists to moderate urban liberals. Accordingly, the party's popularity has skyrocketed to around 30 percent. Projections by the Turkish Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) show that if AKP receives 32 percent of the vote, it might even win a parliamentary majority, since many of the remaining votes will go to parties that do not reach the threshold for entering parliament.

Nevertheless, AKP will need to address its roots in banned Islamist parties of the past. Many moderate voters -- along with the military, which is determined to uphold the secular traditions of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey -- are nervous about Tayyip Erdogan, who remains the AKP chair despite a September 20 order banning him from running for office due to his past conviction for inciting "religious hatred." Some analysts argue that if AKP wins a parliamentary majority, Erdogan might feel confident enough to call for constitutional amendments that would qualify him for office. Yet, such a scenario could cause a split within AKP between the party's majority moderate voters, who would shy away from confrontation on the one hand, Erdogan and the Islamist wing on the other.

#### Post-Election Scenarios and Turkish Foreign Policy

Although AKP will probably become the largest party in the new parliament by far, an AKP majority is not the most likely scenario. Even without a majority, the party would be asked by President Necdet Sezer to form the next government. In order to do so, AKP would be forced to establish a coalition with other parties in the parliament. Past experience shows that such coalitions take a long time to form in Turkey, sometimes up to two months. Hence, a new government may not be in office in Ankara before the end of the year. Until then, Washington may have to deal with the current government regarding any action on Iraq.

Once a new government is in place, two major foreign policy issues -- EU accession and the Iraq dilemma -- will keep it busy. One can hazard some predictions regarding the next government's stance on these matters by analyzing the foreign policy preferences of the parties that are most likely to constitute the new parliament (namely, AKP, CHP, DYP, and GP):

EU. Although the larger parties -- including AKP -- are staunchly pro-EU, the smaller GP has made virulent anti-EU rhetoric one of the core principles of its platform. But GP's rhetoric has made it the bete noire of Turkish politics; it is

improbable that the party will be invited into a future coalition. Therefore, the elections are unlikely to alter Turkish policy toward the EU.

Iraq. All of the parties likely to win seats follow Turkey's current policy of "cautious and qualified" support for Washington; that is, if Ankara's sensitivities regarding Iraq are taken into account, they will stand with Turkey's longtime ally, the United States. Even the GP seems close to this stance; Uzan has tactfully and consistently shied away from bashing America or raising objections to Washington's campaign against Saddam.

Accordingly, although the upcoming elections might usher in a major realignment of the domestic landscape in Turkey, the nonpartisan orientation of Turkish foreign policy indicates that the projected victors will not force a dramatic shift in Ankara's relations with the EU or the United States.

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