

# Turkish Election Preview:

## Fragmentation of the Center

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



### Brief Analysis

The people of Turkey go to the polls on November 3, 2002, amid a great deal of political and economic uncertainty. Possible outcomes range from a coherent pro-European Union (EU) coalition to a dramatic change following an outright electoral victory by a party attractive to Islamist voters. In Turkey, the election is widely portrayed as a referendum on the country's EU accession. Lack of progress on key EU reforms (abolition of the death penalty; allowances for Kurdish-language broadcasting and education) during Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's debilitating illness provoked the July political crisis that has led to the upcoming elections. (Parliament approved these reforms in early August.) Polls indicate that a majority of Turks support EU membership. What divides parties and voters is not the principle of membership -- which in theory is the logical outcome of Kemal Ataturk's vision of Turkey's European identity -- but rather the issue of how much should be conceded to the EU in order to join.

### Fragmentation of the Political Center

On the surface, Turkey's democracy has many healthy features. Voters, many of whom remain undecided, have a range of platforms and leaders to choose from, including several new faces untainted by association with the recent economic crisis and corruption. In fact, the pro-EU political center could be represented by at least seven center-right and center-left parties. With so many parties espousing similar views, however, the center will be susceptible to fragmentation, long a feature of modern Turkish politics. Fragmentation of the center enabled Islamists and nationalists to enter governing coalitions following the past two elections, leading to virtual paralysis in the government.

In the case of the upcoming elections, many Turks feel that State Minister Kemal Dervis holds the key to the potential success of the center. The former World Bank director returned to Turkey in 2001 to run the economy after the latest economic crisis, and his presence reassured international investors and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is lending Turkey \$16 billion. Because he is popular with both the public and Turkey's pro-Western business community, Dervis is viewed as the magic bullet for the center and was, until recently, the object of relentless courtship by almost every centrist party.

On August 21, however, Dervis joined the center-left Republican People's Party (CHP), headed by his old friend Deniz

Baykal, ending speculation that he was headed for the new center-left party New Turkey (YTP) led by former foreign minister Ismail Cem. In August, Dervis tried to engineer unity between YTP -- which has no national organization and little appeal beyond urban areas -- and other center-left parties. After the party's leaders rebuffed him, he joined CHP. A recent poll and a local by-election in a small city near the industrial hub of Izmir indicated that CHP is currently the largest centrist party and, with Dervis, could challenge the current poll leader, the Justice and Development (AK) Party.

The number of centrist parties complicates any attempts to predict election results. Currently, the center-right party with the greatest public support is the True Path Party (DYP) led by Tansu Ciller, who could return to power after years in the wilderness due to her participation in an Islamist-led coalition following the 1995 elections. Ciller is also rumored to be pursuing alliances with other parties, including the center-right Motherland Party (ANAP) led by former prime minister Mesut Yilmaz, which is at risk of not reaching the 10 percent legal threshold required for representation in the National Assembly. Moreover, the November 3 elections may end the career of seventy-seven-year-old Bulent Ecevit, who in August rejected Baykal's call for center-left unity; Ecevit's center-left Democratic Left Party (DSP) is also in real danger of missing the 10 percent threshold.

#### The Anti-EU Camp

The right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), the largest party in the current parliament, has made opposition to Dervis and the IMF part of its platform ever since MHP leader Devlet Bahceli's opposition to EU and IMF reforms precipitated the breakup of the coalition. Bahceli has positioned MHP as the logical address for nationalist, anti-EU sentiments, despite the party's current low standing in the polls and his own stated support for honorable EU accession. He has taken some articles of the recently enacted reform laws (which were designed in response to EU objections) to Turkey's constitutional court in the hope that the judges would strike them down. In addition, elements in the military and the bureaucracy who oppose one or another of the EU reforms on nationalist grounds may support MHP due to fears that the reforms will strengthen the Kurdish separatist movement or adversely affect Turkish Cypriots.

MHP is also looking to exploit the anger of the lower and lower-middle classes, who have been adversely affected by the economic crisis that began in 2001 and by subsequent IMF-mandated reforms identified with Dervis. Although Dervis had lived in the United States since the 1970s and has an American wife and a non-Turkish mother, there have been few attacks by xenophobes branding him as a foreigner and an agent of international conspiracy aiming to weaken Turkey. Nevertheless, nationalist rhetoric will be a regular feature of election campaigns, and not just from the far nationalist right. Some media commentaries have suggested that the centrist politicians who provoked the upcoming elections were in league with a shadowy U.S.-led conspiracy seeking to dominate Turkey. The stir caused by Cem Uzan -- a media magnate who entered politics as the head of the right-wing Genc (Rebirth) Party, which espouses a virulently populist, anti-IMF platform -- underscores the potency of this kind of rhetoric among segments of the Turkish public.

#### The AK Party

On July 22, Prime Minister Ecevit warned that early elections could lead to a constitutional crisis as a result of strong showings from the Kurdish rights party HADEP, and from the AK Party, led by the charismatic former mayor of Istanbul, Tayyip Erdogan. Ecevit pointed out that such a crisis could threaten Turkey's secular heritage and territorial integrity. Current polls indicate that the AK Party could receive as much as 25 percent of the vote.

Islamist electoral success has long been a fear of both the United States and the Turkish establishment, especially the military. In order to allay such concerns, the AK Party is eschewing an Islamist platform in favor of a moderate, pro-EU platform. Erdogan recently told Newsweek that his party is not Islamist. Many parts of the Turkish

establishment, however, suspect that AK is downplaying its sympathy for the Islamist agenda simply in order to gain power. They are concerned that AK would fall back on the extreme views of past religion-based parties in Turkey once in power, jettisoning its moderate campaign platform. If AK were to implement Islamist-leaning policies upon assuming power, the Turkish military might call for the new government to step down. Military intervention into politics would damage Turkey's chances of EU accession and erode international confidence in its ability to recover from its economic problems.

The next government will have to make decisions on many issues crucial to Turkey's future. It must continue the country's recovery from the 2001 economic crisis by implementing the reform program mandated by the IMF. It must also embark definitively on EU accession, a process that will force a transformation of Turkish governance. Moreover, it must address the Turkish establishment's anxiety concerning potential U.S. action against Iraq and the fate of Cyprus. Greater unity among the parties at Turkey's political center would be the best means of fostering elections that produce a stable and coherent coalition with enough political support to meet these challenges. This would also be the best result for the United States.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute. Keith Weissman is a Washington-based analyst who follows Turkish politics.

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