

Turkish Political Disarray:

Why Now? What Next?

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Brief Analysis

Simmering political problems in Turkey reached a boil following the resignation of the deputy prime minister this week, throwing into doubt both the health of the Ecevit government and Turkey's critical negotiations with the European Union (EU). The current situation, which is fluid and unpredictable, will also have ramifications for Turkey's role in U.S. efforts regarding Iraq.

Background

Turkey is governed by a coalition of three parties in the 550-seat parliament. DSP (a social democratic/nationalist party led by Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit) currently holds only 92 seats, down from 128 last week, while MHP (a conservative/nationalist party led by Devlet Bahceli) holds 127 seats, and ANAP (a center/right party led by Mesut Yilmaz) holds 79 seats. The opposition parties include DYP (a center/right party led by Tansu Ciller), which holds 85 seats, AK (an Islamist party led by the controversial Recip Tayyip Erdogan), which holds 53 seats, and other smaller parties.

At a moment when U.S. plans for military action in Iraq are being discussed in the New York Times, when Turkey's accession into the EU is in abeyance due to Ankara's failure to meet the EU's criteria for political reform, and when Turkey is in danger of an economic relapse just as it has begun to emerge from the worst financial crisis of its history, the prolonged illness of Prime Minister Ecevit one of the most powerful forces in Turkish politics over the past half century has created a state of paralysis.

Conditions in Turkey have reached a boiling point not just because the prime minister is ill, but because his illness has immobilized the government at the very moment when relations with the EU are approaching a turning point. After years in which it has been unwilling to set a date for Turkey's accession, the EU now seems willing to do so if Turkey meets the conditions set out in the "Copenhagen criteria" for membership (at least according to recent statements by EU commissioner for enlargement Gunter Verheugen). The issues that Turkey must resolve include the lifting of the death penalty, the granting of cultural and linguistic rights to the Kurds, and the resolution of the Cyprus conflict, so that when Cyprus joins the EU, it will do so as a unified country. Despite the conservative MHP's objections to these concessions, so united is the Turkish public in support of EU membership that the necessary compromises could be made.

As recently as July 9, Ecevit insisted that despite his ill health, his government would remain in power until 2004. The current crisis was triggered by the resignation this week of Ecevit's Deputy Prime Minister Husamettin Ozkan. Now, MHP leader Bahceli has joined in calling for elections this fall; at this point, the real question is whether the government can hold together even that long. At present, thirty-six deputies have left Ecevit's DSP, and six members of the cabinet have resigned. MHP now holds the largest number of seats in the Turkish parliament.

If Ecevit were to have a change of heart and relinquish power, the results would be difficult to predict. Several possible trends can be identified, however. A restructuring of the left/center might ensue, to include Foreign

Minister Ismail Cem, State Minister for the Economy Kemal Dervis, and former deputy prime minister Ozkan. It is unclear at present what roles ANAP's Yilmaz and DYP's Ciller will play. Others think that former diplomat Mehmet Ali Bayar, who has recently returned to Turkey, may also be a significant actor in whatever scenario unfolds. Moreover, if Ecevit persists in clinging to power, some or all of these figures may create a new party, and the left/center forces may join with Deniz Baykal of CHP (Ataturk's party). As for the MHP, it seems to be concentrating on rebuilding its core constituency for the time being.

Relations with the United States

Turkey is so consumed at the moment with its domestic political crisis that scant attention is being paid to foreign affairs. Nevertheless, U.S. deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz's planned visit to the region has been given wide press coverage in Turkey. The Turkish public is profoundly ambivalent, if not outright apprehensive, about regime change in Iraq, and many have voiced considerable skepticism toward various plans discussed in the American press involving an insurrection led by the opposition Iraqi National Congress. The widely held Turkish view is that the Kurds of northern Iraq have never had it so good, and that they would be extremely reluctant to risk the kind of vicious retaliation they faced during the Gulf War. The inner circles of the Turkish government and military are also worried about the fate of Mosul and Kirkuk, two oil-rich, formerly Ottoman territories. They fear the creation of a Kurdish state and the disintegration of Iraq. In the current environment, it will be difficult for the United States to persuade the Turkish people, much as they loathe Saddam Husayn, that regime change in Iraq is a worthwhile undertaking. Public opinion on this subject can be changed, but that would require a tremendous effort on the part of a decisive leadership with a clear focus on this issue.

For more than two decades, the United States has been a strong and consistent supporter of Turkey's EU candidacy. Although some influential American policy analysts have in recent months advised the Turks to "forget about Europe," this viewpoint is unrealistic and, in the end, contrary to U.S. interests. Whatever differences the United States may have with Europe at the moment over various legal, environmental, and political issues, there is no question that Europe is America's long-term partner in the resolution of many conflicts that threaten peace and economic stability worldwide.

What Next?

Sedat Ergin, probably Turkey's best analyst of the domestic political scene, wrote in *Hurriyet* on July 9 that "a determined, resolute, dynamic government is much preferable to the ambiguity prevailing today." Elections this fall might produce a government with reformed social-democratic and centrist elements dedicated to the continuing Western orientation of Turkey, a path marked nearly a century ago by the country's founder. The new government would have to exhibit considerable resolve, determination, and discipline toward passing the necessary legislation for EU candidacy, continuing the implementation of the International Monetary Fund's requirements, and cooperating with the United States on Iraq.

Events could unfold in a different direction, however. The AK party's Islamist leader, Recip Tayyip Erdogan, has long sought early elections because he believes that his party would come out ahead. His support derives from Turkey's urban poor, the people who benefit most from ministrations of Islamist charity, many of whom are recent Kurdish migrants to the cities of western Turkey. The Islamists have filled a vacuum left by the failures of the centrist and social-democratic parties to improve the economy and create hope for this segment of Turkish society.

Turkey is at a crossroads. The current crisis is a microcosm of the great and historic choice facing Turkish politics and society. Should Turkey continue to strive toward the ultimate goal of membership in a wealthy club to which it can provide, among other things, a dynamic young work force and one of the world's best armies? Or should it align itself with regional influences that would encourage the Islamist elements in Turkish society and gradually lead the

country toward closer alliances with the troubled Persian and Arab societies on its borders?

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