

Turkey's New President

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Brief Analysis

Today's election by Parliament of Ahmet Necdet Sezer as president of Turkey brings a fresh but somewhat paradoxical personality to a job that can be powerful or not, depending in large part on the officeholder's personality. During a two-year stint as chief of Turkey's highest court, Sezer has been an outspoken advocate of increased democratization and rule of law in Turkey, but it is unclear if he will be able or inclined to use his presidential powers boldly to try to implement his stated vision. Lacking foreign affairs experience and foreign languages, he is unlikely to be a powerful influence on foreign and security policy, except perhaps in one area: the European Union (EU), which will welcome his democratic vision and may see him as an important interlocutor. His firm secularism gratifies the military, which may nevertheless harbor some doubts about him.

Today's Vote. Sezer's election by Parliament today, in the third round of voting, was anticlimactic. Sezer had already achieved a comfortable majority by the second round and his major competitor, parliamentary speaker Yildirim Akbulut, subsequently dropped out. A two-thirds majority is required in the first two rounds, whereas a simple majority is sufficient for election in the third round.

The fact that nearly 40 percent of parliament did not vote for Sezer today, even though his election was a foregone conclusion, reflects the strong feeling of many parliamentarians that the president should come from the ranks of Parliament, as well as lingering hesitation, particularly on the right, about Sezer himself. Some nationalists feared that he is too liberal on the Kurdish issue; some of the religious resented his court votes to close a pro-Islamist party and strike down legislation legalizing the wearing of headscarves on college campuses; and perhaps others among opposition parliamentarians simply wanted to embarrass the Ecevit government, which nominated Sezer.

Selection Process. Sezer was an inspired choice by center-left Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and a departure from "politics as usual." At 58 years old, Sezer is a full generation younger than Ecevit and departing president Suleyman Demirel. A life-long jurist, he is the first of Turkey's ten presidents to come from neither a military nor a political background.

Ecevit needed to find a candidate who was acceptable to both the right-leaning parliament and the secular establishment. Thanks to his secularist and democratic credentials, Sezer was able to bridge that gap. Sezer's profession endowed him with a political nonpartisanship many Turks find appealing in a president, and his record suggested an independence of the military that enhanced his acceptability to religious traditionalists who might

despise his determinedly secularist voting record. All five party leaders in parliament--all of whom but Ecevit are to the right of center--endorsed Sezer's candidacy. Sezer thus enters office with somewhat the aura of consensus. Ecevit's shrewd management of the Sezer nomination and election--just weeks after an embarrassing debacle, when parliament defeated his effort to extend Demirel's term--showed he retains his political touch.

Presidency Prospects. A mixture of excitement and unease greets Sezer's election in Turkey. Some believe he will be a benign, largely ceremonial president who will cut a progressive image for Turkey. Others see him as a potential democratic crusader who will dramatically move Turkey toward full democracy and perhaps EU membership. Before his presidential nomination, Sezer was not a well-known figure in Turkey, where judges usually receive little publicity. He caused a stir in April 1999 with a bold speech criticizing democratic deficiencies in Turkish law but rapidly faded from public attention. He will hold the presidency for seven years, barring death or impeachment for "high treason," so he will have ample opportunity to leave his stamp on the nation.

Sezer appears to be generally a liberal who rejects religious politics. It is expected that he will use his moral authority and bully pulpit to extol the virtues of democratization and the rule of law. The presidency's actual power in this realm is limited, however. He cannot initiate legislation. He can veto it, but Parliament can override by repassing the legislation with a simple majority. Sezer also has said he opposes the strong presidency that has evolved under Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel over the past decade, so it is not clear how forcefully he will fight for his stated beliefs.

Relations with the Military. Ecevit explicitly said that he did not discuss his choice of Sezer with the military; given the military's keen interest in the Turkish presidency, it is reasonable to believe he did so, however. The military had publicly said that it had "thoughts" on the presidential race.

The military surely likes Sezer's secularism and his certain acceptability to the West. Just as surely, it must wonder if he will prove to be a loose cannon. He has called for judicial review of personnel decisions made by the Supreme Military Council, which in recent years has expelled hundreds of officers for fundamentalist leanings and other objectionable politics. He has also made clear his opposition to laws limiting freedom of expression that the military believes are important especially in fighting the spread of Kurdish separatism and Islamic fundamentalism.

Foreign Policy. Sezer has no experience in the realm in which recent Turkish presidents have left their strongest imprint, foreign policy. He cannot entirely forsake foreign policy:

- The president inevitably is exposed to a wide range of foreign leaders, as he is head of state and represents the state on official occasions.
- The president is voting chairman of the powerful NSC, a half-civilian, half-military body that is widely considered a major vehicle of military authority in Turkey and whose recommendations are rarely contravened by the government. Based on his fealty to the constitution, Sezer presumably will favor control of foreign policy by the civilian government. Sezer's past suggests a willingness to confront the military on occasion, as indicated.
- Sezer will enter office with a formidable foreign constituency on his side, particularly the EU, whose officials will eagerly seek contact with a Turkish president carrying a reputation as a "courageous democrat." The EU likely will try to make Sezer a key interlocutor on human rights issues, at least at first.

Outside the EU context, Sezer is very unlikely to be either a leading initiator or a coordinator of foreign policy bureaucratically, as Demirel was--at least not in the early years of his presidency. One area of direct U.S. interest where Demirel's absence is likely to be most felt is in issues related to Caspian energy, particularly the effort to build a Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Top Turkish bureaucrats credit Demirel with having established crucial contacts with regional leaders and with having imposed coherence on a once chaotic Caspian policymaking process that for a time seemed to endanger prospects for Baku-Ceyhan (which, for other reasons, remains an uncertain bet). It remains to

be seen whether the military or the civilian government will fill the foreign policy decision-making vacuum created by Demirel's departure.

Demirel's Future. Sezer assumes office May 16, and Demirel, 75 but still energetic, returns to private life. He has indicated he will remain politically active, which presumably would mean a return to party politics. His prestige was tarnished by the failure of a constitutional amendment that would have extended his term, however, and a recent poll showed three-quarters of Turks do not welcome his return to politics. Demirel can create further chaos on the already fractured center-right, but probably little else. The ex-president may have to be content playing the role of eminence grise.

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