

Turkey's Presidential Jitters

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Apr 10, 2000

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Brief Analysis

Leaders of Turkey's governing coalition meet tomorrow seeking agreement on a presidential candidate who can muster a parliamentary majority and replace Suleyman Demirel when his term expires May 16. Mainly at stake for Turkey in the upcoming presidential selection process is the survivability and effectiveness of the Ecevit government and the maintenance of stability in civilian-military relations, particularly regarding Islamism.

Why Demirel Is Leaving. Demirel's seven-year term ends May 16. An effort to amend the constitution to extend that term at least three more years failed last week--a blow to the prestige of the government, whose leadership endorsed the amendment, and particularly to Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, who had made it a one-man crusade. Ecevit was convinced Demirel's presidency was a crucial element in the rare political stability Turkey has been experiencing in the past year. He may also have feared Demirel's return to the political fray, now a distinct possibility. Although nearly three-quarters of Turkey's parliament endorsed the amendment in writing, well under the required two-thirds actually voted for it in the secret balloting required for all constitutional amendments.

A number of factors undermined the 75-year-old Demirel's cause: a sense among many parliamentarians, widely shared in the public, that it was time for a change; accumulated resentments directed at a man who has dominated Turkish politics for much of the past thirty-five years; and, perhaps most important, the anger of the many traditionalist parliamentarians at Demirel's having embraced much of the military's secularist agenda. The last point was punctuated early this year, just as the amendment effort was getting underway, when Demirel reappointed as head of the Higher Education Council (HEC) a staunch secularist who had led efforts to ban headscarf-wearing students from universities.

The secret-ballot defeat of the amendment was no mere revolt of the rank-and-file against the leadership, however. Ecevit's coalition partners--Devlet Bahceli, leader of the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (NMP), and Mesut Yilmaz, leader of the center-right Motherland Party (ANAP)--had their own agendas. Although they had agreed to go along with the effort to extend Demirel's term, they distinctly lacked Ecevit's enthusiasm. Many members of the religiously tinged NMP were alienated by the HEC appointment, including probably Bahceli himself. During last year's parliamentary campaign, the NMP pledged to advance the rights of the head-scarfed--one of its important constituencies--but so far it has done nothing. Meanwhile, Yilmaz, who harbors his own presidential ambitions, had an interest in defeating the amendment, and most of the defections probably came from his party. The secret-ballot

rule indulges parliamentarians who want to vote their conscience as well as party leaders who want to take differing positions in public and private.

What's Next. In Turkey, the parliament elects the president. The nomination process starts April 16 (thirty days before the expiration of Demirel's term) and lasts ten days. All candidates must be declared during this period, before voting begins. Thereafter, no more than four rounds of voting will take place between April 26 and May 15. A two-thirds majority is required for election on the first two ballots. If the first two ballots do not yield a victor, only a majority (generally understood to mean 276 votes in the 550-seat body, regardless of abstentions) is required on the third and fourth ballots. Only the two top vote-getters from the third round compete in the fourth. If neither wins a majority, parliament is dissolved and new parliamentary elections are held.

This system virtually assures that a president will be elected and that the government will survive; in any case, it guarantees that the process will be relatively quick. It was designed for those purposes by the military government that oversaw the drafting of the 1982 constitution. For the military and many Turks, the 1980 military coup was largely a response to civilian government paralysis, best symbolized by parliament's failure to elect a president after 115 ballots over five months leading up to the coup. The constitution then in force required indefinite voting until a majority was attained, with no limit on the number of candidates.

The Favorites. This may be the first truly contested election under the 1982 constitution and thus the first true test of the system. The previous two elected presidents, Turgut Ozal and Demirel, vaulted from the prime ministry to the presidency, assured of third-ballot victories by their parliamentary majorities. That type of victory will be more difficult to assure in this coalition of three ideologically dissonant partners. Even if the party leaders do agree on a candidate tomorrow, there is no guarantee that the rank-and-file will endorse the choice, given the ideological and cultural fissures within the coalition. As with constitutional amendments, parliamentary votes on the presidency are conducted by secret ballot, adding further uncertainty.

Whoever the ultimate victor, he is likely to be of civilian background with a right-of-center orientation. The favorite is probably Yilmaz, but only if he wins the support of his coalition partners. Another frequently mentioned name is that of Parliament Speaker Yildirim Akbulut, who was prime minister during the Gulf War (at the time of Turgut Ozal's presidency). Akbulut well matches the conservative, nationalist temperament of parliament, and his election would leave the speakership open for the NMP, the basis of a solid coalition deal. As a member of Yilmaz's party, however, it is at least questionable whether Akbulut would run against his own party leader. Only if Yilmaz chooses not to run--a decision he might reluctantly make if convinced by his coalition partners that he cannot win--would Akbulut likely be a candidate. Coalition partners Ecevit and Bahcheli will want to assure that the new president is somebody who will cooperate with the government.

The Stakes. The Turkish presidency is vaguely defined but substantive. Its power increases proportionally to the weakness and passivity of the popularly elected government. It has minimal power to block legislation--a veto can be overridden by a majority vote--but considerable power to approve and appoint various key personnel, particularly in the judiciary, and to block other government appointments. The president also chairs the powerful half-military, half-civilian National Security Council (NSC), where much of vital national policy is set. Moreover, following the strong presidencies of Ozal and Demirel, the presidency has considerable international visibility.

Demirel's departure will be felt in three main areas: civilian-military relations, foreign policy, and energy policy. Demirel is respectful of the military's power, having been twice displaced as prime minister in coups (1971 and 1980). He has often reflected the military's viewpoint, particularly regarding Islamic fundamentalism, and his traditionalist critics feel he sided too blatantly with the military. His supporters claim that he has been adept at gauging the military's bottom line and keeping the military within bounds--for example, allegedly convincing the military not to resort to a coup in pressing for removal of Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in 1997. In his

position as NSC chairman, he has often been an effective coordinator of foreign policy. Demirel has also helped give cohesion to Turkish energy policies long plagued by interagency rivalries. As an actively involved head of state, he has been seen by many regional states, particularly in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Balkans, as the key Turkish address for foreign policy issues. Whoever his successor, it will take some time before he can fill all those roles effectively.

The presidential selection process poses three dangers to governance in Turkey: (1) that the government will fall over a parliamentary failure to choose a new president; (2) that governmental cohesion will be shaken by disagreements over the process; and (3) that a new president will upset the current balance in military-civilian relations, particularly over Islam- and Islamism-related issues.

Of these potential problems, the first is the least likely, as the government is insulated by the method of presidential selection described above. The second danger is more real and precisely what the leadership meeting tomorrow is intended to avert. Failure of the coalition to agree on (and later elect) a common candidate will cast doubt on the government's cohesion and stability.

The third danger is perhaps the most serious. To garner votes, a potential successor to Demirel may be tempted or forced to promise to undo Demirel's HEC appointment or try to boost the cause of "head-scarved" women in other ways. That could set the stage for difficulties with the military, an eventuality that would divert Turkey from its promising course of economic reform and into another era of political instability.

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