

Turkey's Nationalist Moment

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Brief Analysis

In making two strongly nationalist parties the top vote-getters in this weekend's elections, Turks showed the assertiveness of a nation that feels itself emerging as a regional power and the defensiveness of one still embittered by Western Europe's rejection. The secular establishment can take only slight solace in the decline of the Islamist vote, as the overall voting pattern shows increasing fragmentation; mainstream secular parties garnered little more than half the overall vote. Overall, the result guarantees another era of three-party, and probably unwieldy, government.

Results. With 75 percent of the votes counted, Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's pro-nationalist Democratic Left Party (DLP) has won a clear plurality of the popular vote and a slight lead in parliamentary seats over the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (NAP), which shocked most Turks by finishing second. Every other major party was embarrassed by its showing. Expected by many to win their second straight election, the Islamists finished a lackluster third. Two rival center-right parties, each led by scandal-tainted former prime ministers, finished fourth and fifth. A center-left party, led by former foreign minister Deniz Baykal, a bitter rival of Ecevit's, received less than 10 percent of the vote and thus will be unable to enter parliament. Pro-Kurdish rights HADEP, which many people believe is closely linked to the separatist Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), scored only 4 percent nationally but won several key mayoralties in the Kurdish-majority Southeast, thereby setting up a possible confrontation with authorities.

CHART 1: RESULTS OF RECENT NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Party	1999*	1995	
	% of vote	Estimated Seats (of 550)	% of vote
Motherland Party	13.3%	86	19.65%
True Path Party	12.5%	89	19.19%
Welfare/Virtue Party**	15.0%	111	21.38%
Nationalist Action Party	18.1%	127	8.18%
Democratic Left Party	22.1%	135	14.64%
Republican People's Party	8.5%	0	10.71%
HADEP (Pro-Kurdish Party)	4.3%	0	4.17%
Miscellaneous Other	6.2%	2	2.08%

* From Hurriyet, April 19, 1999, with 73.6% of the vote counted. ** Welfare ran in 1995 but was banned in 1998; Virtue, its de facto successor party, ran in 1999.

Two Brands of Nationalism. The NAP, and to some extent the DLP, rode a rising tide of nationalism in Turkey, fueled not only by the struggle with the PKK and the arrest of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, but far more profoundly by a sense of rejection by Europe. At the same time, Turks feel they have more foreign affairs options than at any time in years. Sensing their growing economy and military prowess, as well as close links with the United States and Israel, Turkey felt strong enough to initiate, and win, a confrontation with neighbor Syria last year. It is now more dismissive than ever of Western, particularly European, efforts to convince it to compromise on Cyprus and Greek-Turkish relations. Moreover, growing ties with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkic Central Asia increase the sense of the possible. It is this mood -- more assertive, more self-confident, more regionally connected, and yet unsettled by its isolation from Europe -- upon which both Bahceli and Ecevit capitalized.

Ecevit is widely seen as a nationalist because of his positions on specific issues -- in particular, support for Turkish Cyprus and strong opposition to the PKK and Kurdish nationalism -- and a "Turkey first" approach to world affairs. The NAP's nationalism is more all-encompassing -- romantic, ideological, and ethnically based, with emphasis on the wider "Turkish nation." This year, the NAP's foreign-policy platform was relatively pragmatic, however, and it seems to have abandoned a longstanding call for a pan-Turkish empire comprising Turkey and the Turkic-speaking parts of the former Soviet Union. In cultural terms, Ecevit is Western-oriented, whereas the NAP looks to central Anatolia and eastward to other Turkic peoples for cultural influences; neither Ecevit nor the NAP exhibits much interest in European Union (EU) membership, however.

Although it is a secular party -- and somewhat incongruously, given its glorification of myths about the pre-Islamic origins of the Turks -- the NAP has long emphasized that Islam is a natural part of Turkish national identity. As a result, the party was able to run comfortably on a joint ticket with Necmettin Erbakan's pro-Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party (RP) in the 1991 elections. Were it not for the military's opposition, the NAP might now consider coalition with the Virtue Party, the de facto successor to the banned Refah Party. Its positive view of Islam and "Turk-Islam synthesis" no doubt boosted NAP's standing in the central Anatolian heartland and perhaps helped lure votes from Virtue.

Ecevit's Success . . . Long regarded as washed up, 73-year-old Ecevit has won his first election since 1977. His achievement is the result of both design and luck: his incorruptability at a time when corruption rumors engulf most of his competitors; his "fluke" election-time incumbency, a result of parliamentary maneuvers; his good fortune to be in office when Turkey captured PKK leader Ocalan; his relative moderation on economic and foreign policy issues since he became deputy prime minister in 1997, easing the concerns of many who liked his secularism and sincerity but otherwise feared his policies; and the perceived slap in the face from the EU, which revitalized his "Turkey first" nationalism. By election day, Ecevit's success was expected, and he also benefitted in the last weeks of the campaign from the perception that he was leading the secular pack; no doubt, many Turks wanting to maximize the value of their anti-Islamist vote decided to back the perceived secular front-runner.

. . . and NAP's Virtually nobody predicted the NAP's success. Most pre-election discussion of the NAP centered on whether it would poll the 10 percent required to enter parliament; it had not done so since the 10 percent threshold was established in 1983. Its only previous success during this period was in 1991, when it ran on a combined slate with Refah. Jointly, the two parties won 16 percent of the vote, but Refah was given most of the credit for that performance. Since the 1995 election, when the NAP won just 8 percent, its legendary leader Alparslan Turkes had died, replaced two years ago by the uncharismatic Bahceli. Nobody expected that Bahceli's NAP could out-do the party's performance under Turkes.

But the NAP was a primary beneficiary of the collapse of the center-right and more than doubled its vote percentage

over the past election. Unlike the scandal-plagued and ideologically fuzzy Ciller and Yilmaz, Bahceli is viewed as principled and of clear views; by simultaneously projecting an image of a more moderate NAP, he was well positioned to scoop up stray secular-nationalist right-wing voters. At the same time, many traditionalists disgruntled with the Islamists no doubt found the nationalist but Islamically tinged NAP an acceptable alternative to Virtue.

Virtue's Failure Virtue was expected to challenge Ecevit's party for first place, given that Refah had won a 21.4 percent plurality in 1995. This year's result ended a streak of five consecutive nationwide elections in which the Islamists increased their vote. As such, it eases some secularists' concern that the Islamists are an unstoppable juggernaut, while probably convincing the military that its policy of confrontation with the Islamists is working.

With Erbakan banned from politics, the untested Recai Kutan led Virtue. Kutan emphasized his party's moderation -- pro-Western, pro-democracy, and pro-free market, in contrast to Refah -- even while also propounding views in support of limited Islamist goals. Virtue was handicapped, however, by the perception that the military would not allow it to take power, no matter what its level of support; by the fact that the state is pursuing judicial action to ban it; by the meager accomplishments, even on Islamist-related issues, of the 1996-1997 Erbakan prime ministry; and perhaps by a plainly visible split in the party, with Erbakan often at odds with his hand-picked successor Kutan, depleting party morale.

The Islamists remain fully ensconced as a power on the Turkish political scene, however. They appear to have won the second-highest total of mayorships (after the NAP), including that of Turkey's largest city, Istanbul -- a particularly strong statement since the previously elected mayor of Istanbul, Refah's Tayyip Erdogan, was convicted of "incitement to religious hatred" and thereby prevented from running again. The Islamists will also make noise in other ways: The unprecedented election of head-scarved women to parliament on Virtue's ticket sets the stage for another confrontation with the dress-code-sensitive secular establishment.

RPP's End RPP's failure to make the threshold is ironic and, in the eyes of many, just deserts. Baykal, its leader, initiated the maneuvers that led to these early elections (originally scheduled for December 2000) that almost nobody else wanted; his loss, just a point or two under his 1995 showing, may partly reflect the voters' punishment. Though founded by Kemal Ataturk in the early 1920s, the RPP's aura as "Ataturk's own party" had long since become more slogan than reality. For years, most staunch Ataturkists have voted for other secular parties. The demise of RPP from parliament also brings down the popular parliamentary speaker and former foreign minister Hikmet Cetin.

The Center Collapses The elections marked the latest step in the ongoing fractionalization of the Turkish system and the decline of the secular center-right, once considered the "natural party of government" in Turkey. For the second consecutive election, six parties have improbably scored between eight and 22 percent of the vote. The four mainstream parties -- the DLP and RPP on the center-left and Yilmaz's Motherland and Ciller's TPP on the center-right -- appear to have polled a total of only 56 percent, suggesting that there may no longer be a "mainstream" in Turkish politics. This total is down from 88 percent in 1987 and 66 percent as recently as 1995. For the center-right, the combined vote of roughly 26 percent is its lowest ever. As the traditional parties decline, their votes are garnered mainly by the more ideological Islamists and nationalists. Together, Virtue and the NAP captured more than one-third of the vote.

The 1999 election was a clear rejection of Ciller and Yilmaz, whose two parties dominated Turkish politics in the 1980s and early 1990s under different leaders. Yilmaz has led Motherland in three national elections; each time its vote has declined further. This disastrous result could convince the parties that they have no future unless they unite. Yet, given the mutual contempt Ciller and Yilmaz have shown for one another, and given their poor images with the voters, it is difficult to imagine that even a united party would prove very stable or attractive to voters, unless there is new leadership. Indeed, along with RPP, three mainstream parties have now seemingly been led to ruin by their leaders.

One clear lesson of Turkey's 1990s political experience: Without electoral reform that produces stronger majorities, Turkey is doomed endlessly to be led by multiparty, and usually weak, governments. Without such reform, over time Turkey is likely to see not only growing fragmentation and extremism, but also increased involvement of the military in decision making.

What Happens Next With some luck, a strong majority government will emerge, but it will have to consist of at least three parties. Ecevit will almost certainly choose Mesut Yilmaz's Motherland Party as one of his partners. He worked well with Yilmaz during their 1997-1998 minority government, with Yilmaz as prime minister, and early in the campaign they indicated a desire to continue their partnership. Ecevit would then have to choose either Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (TPP), Yilmaz's detested rival, or the NAP. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Ecevit and NAP leader Devlet Bahceli each spoke favorably of the other. If the parties cooperate, an Ecevit-Bahceli-Yilmaz government could be the strongest Turkey has seen in years; among its assets would be a more than two-thirds majority, sufficient to amend the constitution.

In the unlikely event that Ecevit fails to form a government, Bahceli himself could form a majority government in concert with Ciller and Yilmaz. It is widely assumed that none of the parties would coalesce with the pro-Islamist Virtue Party, whose participation in government is all but openly opposed by the powerful military. Of course, none of the players' intentions are definitively known, and anything can happen in topsy-turvy Turkish politics. (Coalition formation will not begin formally for nearly another two weeks, or until the official vote count is complete.)

If Ecevit and NAP join ranks, it would be historic -- and shocking to some supporters in both parties. During the violence-ridden 1970s, when the NAP was clearly linked with armed militias that targeted leftists, the social democrat Ecevit regularly denounced the party as "fascist." Bahceli, however, has tried to project a more moderate image since he assumed leadership of the party in 1997, and he has convinced many Turks (including, seemingly, Ecevit) that the party's days of mafia and militia connections are over. Still, for reasons of history, culture, and temperament, the DLP and the NAP will not blend easily.

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