

Turkey on Election Eve

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Brief Analysis

The most likely outcome of the elections will be a three- or four-party, right-left, secular coalition government under the incumbent prime minister, Bulent Ecevit, who will probably receive the most votes among secularists. Whatever the results, the half-civilian, half-military National Security Council will continue to determine the major lines of foreign and security policy, thus assuring that Turkey maintains its strong links with NATO, the United States, and Israel.

Outlook. Four to six parties will receive the required minimum 10 percent national vote on Sunday to enter parliament. Ecevit's Democratic Left Party (DLP) and the Islamist Virtue Party should each win at least 20 percent. The two secular center-right parties, Mesut Yilmaz's Motherland and Tansu Ciller's True Path, will poll a few points less than the front-runners. Hovering around the 10-percent mark are the center-left Republican People's Party (RPP) and the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (NAP). Yilmaz will undoubtedly join Ecevit in coalition; they worked well together in coalition in 1997-1998, when Yilmaz was prime minister. The secular establishment hopes these two leaders can muster a majority between them and form a two-party government. If not, coalition-formation will be particularly difficult, because the leaders of the two center-right parties--like the leaders of the two center-left parties--despise one another.

The elections will probably further the trend toward fragmentation in Turkish politics. With virtually none of the parliamentary parties able to muster significant popular support, the result has been increasingly weak coalition governments. Since 1995, when five parties each polled between 10 percent and 21 percent, Turkey has been ruled by three minority governments; the only majority coalition, led by the Islamist Welfare Party, was doomed by opposition from the military. Voters have shown an increasing impatience with the four mainstream secular parties--two center-right, two center-left--whose composite vote fell from 88 percent in 1987 to 64 percent two elections later, in 1995. Most of the nonmainstream vote goes to the Islamists, pro-Kurdish rights HADEP, and NAP.

The Campaign and Key Issues. The elections bring to an end an unusually dull campaign. Some candidates episodically have taken challenging stands--Yilmaz on Greece and Kurdish-related issues, Ciller on headscarves and religion--but these have not provoked serious debate among the candidates. Lack of public excitement, apparent in the relatively small crowds at candidate rallies, reflects a variety of factors: public cynicism generated by too many broken campaign promises over the years; public doubts about the integrity and competence of several of the party

leaders; and the perception that elected governments have diminishing impact on important issues, with the military, the judiciary, and other unelected officials emerging as the real driving forces in the secularism-Islamism debate.

The Islamist Welfare Party won an unprecedented plurality in 1995 and enough parliamentary seats to prevent the formation of a compatible secular majority coalition throughout the term of this parliament. Accusing Welfare of trying to subvert Turkey's secular regime, in 1998 the courts banned the party and its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, from politics for five years. Welfare's de facto successor party, Virtue, has a more moderate platform than did Welfare, but many secularists harbor doubts about the sincerity of Virtue's conversion. The military, which recently issued a circular saying it would defend secularism "at any cost," has made clear that it will oppose Islamists' return to government. Secularists will be heartened if Virtue fails to improve on Welfare's 21.4 percent vote in 1995 or, more important, fails even to win a plurality.

Many believe the pro-Kurdish rights party HADEP was allowed to run in previous national elections because of its potential to steal votes from the Islamists in the Kurdish-majority Southeast. This posed little risk to a ruling establishment still uncomfortable with the idea of a separate Kurdish ethnic existence; regionally oriented HADEP, it is assumed, cannot break the 10 percent national threshold necessary to get into parliament. Now standing in municipal elections for the first time, however, HADEP is likely to win several mayoralties and local council majorities in the Southeast. This would pose a serious challenge to the Turkish establishment, much of which sees HADEP as a front for the separatist Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), as charged by the public prosecutor in an ongoing court case that seeks HADEP's closure. With HADEP mayors in place, either closure of the party or a generalized effort to remove the mayors administratively or judicially would surely thrust Turkey unflatteringly into the West's human-rights spotlight.

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Regardless of the election results, Turkey's foreign policy is unlikely to change significantly. The major elements of Turkish foreign policy are long-established and likely to hold, whatever the government in place. Growing Turkish nationalism, assertiveness, and activism have shown themselves in places like Cyprus and Syria. All the major political parties favor greater nationalism, and they differ little on key issues like Cyprus, the PKK, and Kosovo. Yet, Turkey's ability to continue to carry out a strong foreign policy may be undermined if it has to focus continually on domestic crises arising from weak governments.

The Balkans and NATO. Although the United States is keen to justify Western involvement in Balkans partially in terms of the potential for Greek-Turkish conflict, this is in fact misleading. Greek-Turkish relations are rife with flashpoints, but the Balkans is not one of them. The Kosovo crisis, contrary to general belief, may even have a positive effect on Greek-Turkish relations, for both Greece and Turkey have responded responsibly, even cooperatively, to the issue. One striking aspect of Turkish involvement in Kosovo is that, although Turkey is clearly part of the interventionist wing of NATO and its citizens have a clear affinity for the Albanian Kosovars, Kosovo is not nearly as emotive an issue for Turks as was Bosnia.

NATO's future direction is critical for Turkey. Turkey wants NATO involved as an effective security guarantor in its region. Turkish confidence in that guarantee could weaken, however, depending on the outcome of NATO's action in Kosovo. NATO has begun to consider a set of issues that are of great importance to Turkey, such as proliferation, energy security, counterterrorism, crisis management, and power projection on the European periphery. If many of these issues are left in abeyance, as is likely, Turkey will interpret that as a sign of lack of responsiveness.

Relations with Russia and the West. Turks are already sensitive about a possible Russian imperial revival and reassertion of Russian interests in the Balkans and the Caucasus. Turkey has been talking to NATO and the United

States about the threat of renewed Russian activism, particularly since Russia has opposed NATO strikes and has generally sided with the Serbs. There is certainly a potential for Western relations with Russia to grow more troublesome. Should that happen, the most likely places of contention would be areas directly touching on Turkey, such as Cyprus, the Balkans, and the eastern Mediterranean. The likelihood of emergent Russian threats would inevitably shape Turkish relations with the West.

In one area, the elections could have a serious foreign policy impact: the gap between foreign policy ambition and what is actually possible. In its external relations, Turkey has been more assertive and active; if political turmoil continues, however, it will be difficult for policymakers to devote attention to foreign policy. The election outcome will not change Europe's attitude toward Turkey, or vice versa. This will inevitably put more pressure on the United States to pick up the slack left by declining Turkish-European ties. U.S. policymakers are interested in pursuing and redefining the strategic relationship with Turkey, and Kosovo reinforces that interest.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Sulay Ozturk and Harlan Cohen.

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