

1999 Turkish Elections:

Background and Outlook

Apr 14, 1999



Brief Analysis

On April 18, Turkish voters will choose a new national government and new municipal governments. These early elections for the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) are unlikely to bring order to a political scene that has been unstable since 1995, when the Republican People's Party (RPP) withdrew support for its coalition party, the True Path Party. This led to early elections in which the pro-Islamist Welfare Party won a plurality but was blocked initially from forming a government. A coalition emerged between the two center-right parties, True Path and the Motherland Party, but personal animosity between the parties' leaders caused that government to fall, whereupon Welfare and True Path formed a coalition government in June 1996. Believing Welfare represented a threat to Turkey's secularist regime, the army led a successful campaign to bring down the government in June 1997; in January 1998 the Turkish courts banned Welfare and its leader from politics. A new Motherland-led minority coalition took power, supported from the outside by the RPP, but when Motherland leader Mesut Yilmaz was forced from office on corruption charges, chaos again ensued. Finally, the main parties agreed to support a minority caretaker government under the Democratic Left Party (DLP) and its leader, Bulent Ecevit. Whereas the particular balance between the parties may change after the election, it is unlikely to change enough to prevent the need for a three- or four-party coalition or another minority government.

The Turkish Electoral System

The 550 members of the TGNA are elected through a hybrid system. Turks choose representatives by proportional representation from their respective districts, but a party must receive at least 10 percent of the total national vote to get seats in the assembly. Therefore, if a particular party wins in a particular district but does not meet the 10 percent threshold nationally, its votes are redistributed to the other parties that win seats in that district. In the 1995 election, the pro-Kurdish rights party HADEP was the first choice in Turkey's majority Kurdish southeastern region; however, as HADEP failed to receive 10 percent of the total vote, Welfare, the second-choice party in much of that area, won many of those seats.

CHART 1: RESULTS OF RECENT NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Party	1991		1995	
	% of vote	Seats in TGNA (of 450)	% of vote	Seats in TGNA (of 550)
Motherland Party (MP)	24.01%	115	19.65%	132
True Path Party (TPP)	27.03%	178	19.19%	135
Welfare Party (WP)	(16.88%)*	(62)	21.38%	158
Nationalist Action Party (NAP)	(16.88%)*	(62)	8.18%	0
Democratic Left Party (DLP)	10.75%	7	14.64%	76
Republican People's Party (RPP)**	20.75%	88	10.71%	49
HADEP (Pro-Kurdish Party)	--	--	4.17%	0

*Welfare and NAP ran on a combined ticket in 1991 election **The Social Democratic People's Party merged with the RPP before the 1995 national elections

Results of Previous Elections

In the 1995 national elections, Welfare emerged as the single-largest vote-getter with 21.38 percent of the vote, translating into 158 deputies. This marked a considerable rise in Islamist influence; in the 1991 national elections, Welfare polled only 16.88 percent while running in tandem with NAP. This rise was largely at the expense of the two center-right parties, True Path and Motherland, which fell from 27.03 percent to 19.19 percent and from 24.01 percent to 19.65 percent, respectively. The election also marked a major shift in the power balance of the center-left. In the 1991 election, the SDPP (predecessor to RPP) was far stronger than its rival, the DLP, with RPP achieving 20.75 percent of the vote as compared to only 10.75 percent for DLP. In 1995, however, DLP received 14.64 percent to RPP's 10.71 percent. In the 1995 elections, two parties that did not meet the threshold also played key roles. The right-wing Nationalist Action Party (NAP) and the Kurdish HADEP party both failed to meet the threshold; Welfare, which shares NAP's strength in western Turkey's suburban shantytowns and HADEP's strength in the East and Southeast, undoubtedly benefited from their failure.

CHART 2: PERCENTAGE OF VOTE PER PARTY IN 1995 NATIONAL ELECTIONS, BY REGION

PARTY	Marmara	Aegean	Med.	C. Anatolia	Black Sea	East	Southeast
MP	21%	19.9%	16.4%	18.5%	26.8%	16.7%	16.0%
TPP	19.3%	27.0%	20.6%	16.5%	17.5%	15.0%	18.9%
WP	21.1%	9.3%	16.0%	27.0%	19.4%	32.5%	23.7%
DLP	19.8%	12.8%	11.8%	19.0%	19.0%	3.8%	2.4%
RPP	10.2%	12.6%	14.3%	11.7%	7.5%	7.7%	4.6%
NAP	4.4%	7.1%	13.4%	11.2%	6.7%	9.4%	4.1%
HADEP	2.6%	2.9%	4.9%	1.6%	1.1%	9.5%	25.0%

Source: Isin Celebi, *Siyasette Kilitlenme ve Cozum*, 1996

Some of these trends could already be seen in the 1994 municipal elections. Though True Path and Motherland led in city councils and borough selectmen, respectively, Welfare won a major victory in the race for mayorships of provincial capitals, winning 28 mayorships, including those of the two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara. In contrast, Motherland received only 14 mayorships; True Path, 12; NAP, 7; and RPP, 5. Welfare also came in a close third in both borough selectmen and city councils, receiving 18.94 percent and 19.09 percent of the vote respectively.

CHART 3: MAYORSHIPS OF PROVINCIAL CAPITALS, BY PARTY

YEAR	MP	TPP	WP	DLR	PR	PP	NAP	HADEP	SDPP*
1989	1	16	5	0	0	3	0	0	40
1994	14	12	28	0	5	7	0	0	10

* The Social Democratic People's Party merged with the RPP before the 1995 national elections

CHART 4: PERCENTAGE OF VOTE PER PARTY IN LOCAL ELECTIONS (CITY COUNCILS)

YEAR	MP	TPP	WP	DLP	RPP	NAP	HADEP	SDPP*
1989	21.8%	25.1%	9.8%	9.0%	--	4.1%	--	28.7%
1994	21.0%	21.4%	19.1%	8.8%	4.8%	8.0%	--	13.6%

* The Social Democratic People's Party merged with the RPP before the 1995 national elections

Main Players in the 1999 Elections

Virtue Party (FP). Leader: Recai Kutan. Current seats: 144. General Position: Islamist. In December 1997, when it became clear that the army might ban Welfare from politics, members of the Islamist movement created the Virtue Party. After Welfare and its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, were banned, most of the party's parliamentary deputies quickly regrouped and joined Virtue. Recai Kutan, a moderate civil-engineer who had served as Minister of Construction and Minister of Energy under Erbakan, was named the party's leader. Rumor had it that he had been

hand-picked by Erbakan.

Many questions linger concerning the true character of the new party. Virtue claims to be a new party and not simply an extension of Welfare. In its election campaign, it has tried to redraw itself as a center-right party. Whereas Welfare had eschewed ties with the West, openly slandered Israel, and called for a more Muslim-world-oriented foreign policy, Virtue has supported Turkey's involvement in NATO and its European Union aspirations and has toned down its anti-Israel rhetoric. Whereas Welfare had espoused an economic policy known as the "Just Order" that called for the abolition of taxes and interest, Virtue has adopted an economic policy resembling that of Social Democrats in Britain and Germany. Despite these differences, most Turks are skeptical, believing the party still threatens the secular nature of the Turkish state. It is unlikely that the army would allow it to be part of a ruling coalition.

Support for the party is strongest in the East and Southeast, rural and central Anatolia, and in the shantytowns that surround Turkey's big cities. Its anticorruption message plays well with the urban poor. Most of all, the party has a powerful grassroots organization capable of mobilizing its voters. Although Virtue's internal divisions and potential to be banned may drive voters away, the party's general success in governing municipalities may stand it in good stead, as voters reward it for the benefits it has brought them at the local level.

Motherland Party (MP). Leader: Mesut Yilmaz. Current seats: 136. General Position: Center-Right. One of two center-right parties with almost exactly the same ideologies, Motherland is Western-oriented and favors liberal economic policies such as privatization and tax reform. Motherland was forced from power after allegations that its leader, Mesut Yilmaz--who was previously seen as a generally "clean" politician--had been involved in corruption and had Mafia connections. In some ways this has made the party a lightning rod for voter anger over corruption in Turkish politics. Others, however, say the party's popularity has only been helped by its time in power--it was perceived to have done a reasonably good job running the country, in particular by lowering inflation to under 70 percent annually. Despite their similar views, Motherland and True Path are impeded from cooperation by deep enmity between the two parties' leaders, Yilmaz and Tansu Ciller.

True Path Party (TPP). Leader: Tansu Ciller. Current seats: 98. General Position: Center-Right. True Path is Turkey's other center-right party and, like Motherland, it supports pro-Western, liberal policies. In June 1993, Ciller was elected the party's leader and became Turkey's first female prime minister after Suleyman Demirel stepped down to become president. In 1995, True Path ran on a strongly anti-Islamist platform. Nonetheless, it was True Path that eventually entered into coalition with the Islamist Welfare Party in June 1996, leading a number of members to defect from the party.

For these elections, Ciller has taken a new tack. True Path is now actively pursuing Welfare/Virtue's electorate. Ciller has tried to recruit support from the powerful religious orders (tarikats) and has taken to wearing headscarves in public and on campaign pamphlets. True Path's hope is that it can appear as a Islam-friendly party free from Virtue's potential to be banned.

Democratic Left Party (DLP). Leader: Bulent Ecevit. Current Seats: 61. General Position: Center-Left. Currently leading the ruling party, DLP's Bulent Ecevit is a veteran of Turkish politics. The 73-year-old prime minister first entered the TGNA in 1957 and served as prime minister in 1974 (when he ordered Turkish troops to intervene in Cyprus), 1977, and 1978-1979. Ecevit was banned from politics along with other leaders, such as Demirel and Erbakan, after the 1980 coup. The ban was lifted in 1987.

The DLP is social-democratic and strongly secularist. Whereas many Westerners were concerned by Ecevit's previous statements against privatization and against Turkey's involvement in Operation Provide Comfort, since becoming prime minister in January 1999, Ecevit has taken a moderate path, acquiescing in U.S. use of Turkey's Incirlik air base for operations against Iraq and lowering inflation to nearly 50 percent annually. It appears that he

and his party have moved closer to the center. Both the DLP and Motherland have lauded their cooperative relationship under Yilmaz's government and have spoken openly of forming a coalition after the elections. This, along with Turkey's capture of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorist leader Abdullah Ocalan during Ecevit's watch, seems to have vastly improved the DLP's electoral chances.

Republican People's Party (RPP). Leader: Deniz Baykal. Current Seats: 55. General Position: Center-Left. RPP had been the leading left-center party before the 1995 elections, when it was overtaken by DLP. Ironically, though RPP leader Deniz Baykal was instrumental in calling for 1999's early elections, it is now questionable whether his party will even break the 10 percent threshold.

Nationalist Action Party (NAP). Leader: Devlet Bahçeli. Current Seats: 3. General Position: Far-Right. NAP is Turkey's most right-wing party. An ultranationalist party, NAP takes an even tougher stand on Kurdish separatists than the center-right parties and derives most of its support from the impoverished suburbs of Turkey's large cities. The party claims it has broken long-time ties to illegal, right-wing militias. Although NAP failed to break the threshold in 1995, polling only 8.2 percent, many prognosticators foresee the party breaking 10 percent this time around.

People's Democracy Party (HADEP). Leader: Murat Bozlak. Current Seats: 0. General Position: Pro-Kurdish Rights. HADEP supports greater cultural rights and autonomy for Turkey's Kurds and claims to have no separatist aims. Critics argue that HADEP is only an extension of the separatist PKK. The state prosecutor currently is seeking to close HADEP for alleged ties to the PKK.

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