

Turkey's New Government:

Back to the Future

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Brief Analysis

Twenty years after his last stint as prime minister, 73-year-old Bulent Ecevit once again became Turkey's prime minister yesterday. His minority government is unlikely to accomplish much, other than to take the nation to early (but long planned) elections scheduled for April 18. Given traditional difficulties in government formation -- this one took 46 days -- Turkey likely will not have a firmly established government this year before June 1. Financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund, and international investor confidence, probably will not be forthcoming until that more authoritative government is in place.

The Government. In accordance with the Turkish constitution, Ecevit formally became prime minister yesterday when President Suleyman Demirel accepted his cabinet list. The parliamentary vote of confidence that likely will confirm his government in office is planned for Sunday. This is the fourth government, and the third minority government, since the 1995 elections. (Indicative of the problematic parliamentary arithmetic and instability produced by those elections, each all-secular government has been minority-led. Only the pro-Islamist Necmettin Erbakan led a majority coalition, and that one fell because of a pressure campaign led by the military.)

Ecevit's Democratic Left Party (DLP), with 61 representatives, is only the fourth largest in the 550-seat parliament. It will be supported from the outside by two rival right-of-center secular parties, outgoing prime minister Mesut Yilmaz's Motherland Party (MP, 137 seats) and former prime minister Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (TPP, 97). Yilmaz's government collapsed in November following allegations that he had interfered in the sale of a state bank. Bitter foes Ciller and Yilmaz, both now the objects of malfeasance allegations, are making common cause to avert lifting of parliamentary immunity and referral of their cases to the courts.

Every ministry in the new government is controlled by Ecevit's DLP, except justice, interior, and communications; these three, by law, must be held by independents during a pre-election period. Of note is that Foreign Affairs Minister Ismail Cem; Minister of State Sukru Gurel, who has responsibility for Cyprus and European Union affairs; and Treasury Minister Zekeriya Temizel retain their posts from the previous government. The new defense minister -- a position that wields little real power but is represented on the powerful National Security Council -- is Hikmet Sami Turk, who was in charge of human rights in the previous government and was generally well-regarded by

human rights organizations in Turkey and abroad.

Who is Bulent Ecevit? A three-time prime minister in the 1970s, and a part-time poet, Ecevit returned to government as deputy prime minister in the Yilmaz government formed in 1997. His roots in Turkish politics are deep. He first entered parliament in the 1950s. He captured the leadership of the Ataturk-founded Republican People's Party in 1972, ousting Ataturk's legendary comrade and successor, Ismet Inonu. Ecevit brought Turkish politics its first serious taste of European-style leftism, including a socialist orientation, Third World sympathies, and paranoia about the intentions of Western capitalist allies. He is most famous in Turkey and the West as the prime minister who gave the green light for Turkey's 1974 military intervention in Cyprus. He also committed one of the great blunders of Turkish diplomatic history, rejecting a request from the European Union (EU, then known as the Economic Community) that Turkey apply for membership in the late 1970s. That decision, it is widely believed, paved the way for Greece to enter the EU rather than have its application paired (and probably put on indefinite hold) with Turkey's. Since joining, Greece has used the leverage of membership to undermine Turkey's relations with the EU.

Ecevit is the third party-leader banned by the 1980-1983 military government to capture the prime ministry in the 1990s. The others are Suleyman Demirel (now president of Turkey) and Necmettin Erbakan (a pro-Islamist once again banned last year). That result mocks the goals of the military government leaders, who thought they were putting in place a structure that would assure the emergence of new blood in Turkish politics.

Short-Term Outlook. In the rare position of being a lame duck upon taking office, Ecevit will have a limited substantive agenda. He hopes to pass legislation on the budget, banking, and social security to convince the IMF to complete a stand-by agreement or at least to impress international financial markets so Turkey can more easily secure loans. Turkey faces staggering payments -- some \$20 billion, mainly on domestic debt -- in the first four months of this year. Given Ecevit's leftist views, and all politicians' tendencies toward pre-election populism, even planned legislation will not be easily passed.

In general, Ecevit will not be in office long enough, nor have enough parliamentary support, to have much of an impact. Human rights reform, always a complicated issue in Turkey, is unlikely during Ecevit's brief tenure. Badly needed electoral reform is virtually out of the question.

There will be no meaningful change in Turkey's foreign and security policy, in which the military tends to have the largest say. Ecevit will continue to insist on a two-state solution for Cyprus, a policy he successfully pushed in the previous government. Traditionally emphasizing that Turkey should give primacy to relations with its neighbors, Ecevit has longstanding sympathies toward Iraq; as acting prime minister when Yilmaz was abroad last year, he announced that Turkey would establish ambassadorial-level relations with Saddam Husayn's government. (That decision remains on the books but unimplemented.) He has often expressed misgivings about U.S.-British policies in Iraq, which he worries will lead to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Within ruling circles, he will be a voice for limiting Turkey's involvement in any of Washington's anti-Saddam efforts. That merely reinforces the military's own instincts, however.

Skeptical about Western intentions toward Turkey -- he has often charged that Turkey's allies seek to create an independent Kurdish state not only in Iraq but in Turkey's southeast -- Ecevit has nevertheless taken a generally pragmatic attitude toward Washington and the West over the past eighteen months in office. Ecevit and kindred party spirits, particularly Minister of State Gurel, seem almost to welcome the EU's currently cool attitude toward Turkish membership. From their viewpoint, that allows Turkey to pursue more independent policies in Cyprus and elsewhere, without having to be concerned about the EU's unwelcome views on those issues.

Ecevit has good relations with current military leaders. They like his honesty and clean reputation, his nationalist

views regarding the Kurdish issue and Cyprus, his firm commitment to secularism, and his genuine love for Atatürk.

What's Ahead? Although elections need not have been scheduled until December 2000, Yilmaz last spring bowed to pressure for an earlier date. Fearing that the April 18 elections will be a carbon copy of the previous national elections in December 1995, in which Erbakan's pro-Islamist party won a plurality and the secular parties emerged divided and weak, the military and President Demirel have made little secret of their desire to see the April elections postponed. That is unlikely, however. An alternative approach might be to find a pretext to ban the Virtue Party, the successor to Erbakan's Welfare Party, which was closed by the courts for anti-secular activity last year. Recent military statements have sparked speculation in Turkey that Virtue's days may be numbered.

The military and its supporters view the Islamists as bent on destroying democracy and therefore not deserving of democratic privileges. As long as the experience of the Erbakan prime ministry remains a fresh memory, it is a near-certainty that the military would not allow Islamists to lead a government, or probably even participate in one, again. The decision on Virtue's future thus will turn on pragmatic considerations. If Virtue competes, the military's gloomy view of election prospects might be realized and Turkey could face several more years of government instability. If Virtue is banned, the prospects for a workable, all-secular, majority government will increase considerably, but Turkey will have to weather more Western criticism of its democracy and the alienation of a significant minority of its citizens.

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