Turkey's Political Tangle

by Alan Makovsky **(/experts/alan-makovsky)**

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Brief Analysis

Early Turkish elections, recently set for April 18, 1999, hold little prospect for change in a longstanding political impasse, yet they raise potential problems for Turkey's domestic and foreign policies -- not least its approach to Greek Cypriot plans to deploy Russian S-300 surface-to-air missiles. Meanwhile, the departure of the military leadership team that was a driving force behind the expansion of Turkish-Israeli military relations and the military-led assault on Islamic fundamentalism also raises questions about future policies.

Why Elections? Despite a near-consensus parliamentary vote, almost nobody in Turkey actually wants these elections, which have been forced on the government by the leader of a left-of-center political party that barely made it into parliament in the last election in 1995. Like small parties in other parliamentary systems, Deniz Baykal's Republican People's Party (RPP) gains its strength through control of a swing vote between two rival blocs.

> Baykal is seemingly alone in actually wanting elections. He apparently is convinced he will receive more backing from Turkish voters this time around, based on national angst over Islamic fundamentalism and his party's strong secularist credentials. Aside from the RPP, virtually every party sees itself as hampered by money or organizational problems or low standing in the polls and would have preferred to postpone the vote until closer to the constitutionally mandated date in 2000. Put to the test in a parliamentary vote, however, no one wanted to appear intimidated by the prospect of elections.

Baykal's support from outside the government has been crucial to both the existence of Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz's minority government and the government's ability to pass legislation. Baykal's crowning deal required the government to agree to elections -- nearly nine months in advance -- and Yilmaz to resign in favor of a caretaker government at the end of 1998. It is unclear what Yilmaz won in exchange for this unusual arrangement, other than Baykal's support for unspecified legislative initiatives between now and January. Some speculate that Baykal pledged to oppose pending parliamentary corruption charges targeting Yilmaz and to back corruption charges aimed at Yilmaz's nemesis, former prime minister Tansu Ciller. Parliament could vote to lift Ciller's immunity or, less likely, to send her case directly to the supreme court.

> In an odd but telling sign of unease over the election plans, the leader of one of the governing coalition parties (himself a co-sponsor of the elections bill) has already had second thoughts, calling upon parliament to vote again, this time to delay the elections until a later date. Such action is unlikely, however.

Stakes in Politics. . . Turkish politics and governance has been unstable since the last election in December 1995, which resulted in an Islamist party as the leading vote-getter and a fractious parliament unable to produce a strong, stable, secular coalition. Since then, Turkey has been governed by two minority governments (including the present one) and by an Islamist-led coalition that provoked active opposition from the secularist military.

Unhappily, polls show little change in voter sentiment since 1995, suggesting that a new vote could yield results similar to those in the last. Any one of three conditions could alter that calculus dramatically: electoral reform, a court case banning the pro-Islamist Fazilet (Virtue) Party, or prosecution of Ciller on corruption charges and the consequent decimation of her moderate-right party, which is Yilmaz's chief rival. The first of these is highly unlikely. The latter two are possible but by no means certain.

...and Policy The elections decision lays the groundwork for an unprecedentedly long political season between now and April; as in most parliamentary democracies, Turkish campaigns are usually brief, roughly two months. An extended election season will likely have undesirable repercussions on Turkey's domestic and foreign affairs. Of course, there are two predictable aspects of any election period, but in this case they will unfortunately be prolonged: the government's loss of authority and influence as it immediately becomes a "lame duck," and a slowdown of bureaucracy as civil servants and diplomats wait for the political situation to be clarified.

> A third danger is that politicians may be tempted to engage in populist-style, pre-election spending. Turkey's economy still suffers from pre-election spending sprees in 1987 and 1995. Yilmaz and his party may calculate that politically motivated government spending between now and the end of 1998 is all the more necessary because the party will lose the advantage of incumbency in January, well before the actual election.

Fourth, in foreign policy, the temptation for politicians to engage in populist rhetoric and politically oriented decision-making directed at Greece, Greek Cypriots, and the European Union (EU) -- the leading targets of Turkish frustration these days -- and even at NATO enlargement could occur in particularly perilous times. Controversial Russian surface-to-air missiles, the S-300s, are reportedly to arrive in Cyprus in mid-autumn. Turkey has threatened military action to remove them, and Athens has warned it would respond. In such situations, looming elections normally do not breed statesmanship. Regarding the EU, Yilmaz's tendency toward toughly worded rhetoric and "arms-length" dialogue is well established but will likely be reinforced by electoral considerations. The military will have a major say in these issues -- particularly the response to the S-300s -- but the importance of the political leadership and the political environment should not be discounted. NATO enlargement will come up for parliamentary ratification this autumn. The Turkish government committed itself to supporting enlargement at the July 1997 NATO summit in Madrid. Yet, some in Turkey have argued that Ankara should use its veto over enlargement to wrest concessions from the EU, and it is possible such ideas will resurface as parliamentarians start focusing on elections.

> Fifth, Yilmaz's agreement to resign in early January jeopardizes his invitation to visit the United States toward the end of this year. That invitation was extended in general terms during his visit to Washington last December, but no specific date was set. With Turkey in election mode and Yilmaz about to step down, it is questionable whether Washington will offer the prime minister the campaign gift of a meeting at the White House. By putting this visit in doubt, Yilmaz -- and Turkey -- may miss an opportunity to establish a Turkish prime ministerial visit as a near-routine part of the annual Washington calendar.

The Military The announcement last week by Turkey's Supreme Military Council of its annual rotations also has potential policy implications. As expected, Chief of Staff Ismail Hakki Karadayi retired and Deputy Chief of Staff Cevik Bir rotated to a new post in Istanbul. These two were strongly identified with two dramatic policy initiatives of recent times, the building of ties with Israel and the military-led effort to curb domestic political Islam. Bir has been

an unusually accessible and outspoken senior military official, and he was often seen as the engine of both these campaigns. His departure from Ankara raises at least the theoretical possibility that these initiatives may now be pursued less avidly. Support for ties with Israel probably enjoys a consensus in the military (and, for the most part, the civilian) leadership, but there is widespread speculation in Turkey that the new chief of staff, Huseyin Kivrikoglu, favors a less assertive approach toward civilian politicians and, by extension, toward political Islam.

With his prestigious assignment to command the First Army, Bir is likely to retain some policy influence within the military, particularly since he remains potentially in line to become chief of staff. That influence, and that of the military itself, will continue to be significant in political and policy terms if, as expected, the next Turkish election shows Islamist sentiment holding steady and yields no clear winner.

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