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POSTPONING THE POST-ECEVIT ERA

Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, who has been leading Turkey's three-party coalition government since his Democratic Left Party (DLP) emerged as the leading party in the April 1999 elections, went back into hospital on May 17. The doctors diagnosed a broken rib and thrombophlebitis in his left leg and recommended that the 77-year-old Ecevit remain in hospital for at least a week. Although Ecevit's problems do not appear to be very serious, he has been unable to function effectively since the beginning of May, when a reported intestinal problem originally forced him into hospital. Two weeks of home care followed by his return to hospital have inevitably prompted widespread speculation in Turkey as well as abroad that the country has entered the beginning of "the post-Ecevit era." However, the apparent determination of Ecevit to continue in office, buttressed by his influential wife, Rahsan, who is cofounder and deputy leader of the DLP, as well as his coalition partners, Devlet Bahçeli and Mesut Yılmaz, the leaders of the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) and Motherland Party (MP), has effectively postponed the much-discussed transition.

The Turkish political system will not, however, be able to indefinitely postpone a confrontation with the growing perception of a vacuum in government. The coalition continues to command a clear majority in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) despite its current unpopularity. However, its initial response to Ecevit's incapacitation was hesitant and indecisive. Its subsequent failure to deal with the problem in an expeditious and effective manner will only prolong the current political uncertainty. At the same time, the country is likely to witness an aggravation of its urgent foreign policy problems, such as relations with the European Union (EU), the Cyprus issue and the expansion of the war against terrorism to Iraq. Turkey could also face serious threats to its ongoing efforts to deal with the economic crisis that may not yet be over despite confident assertions to the contrary.

CONFUSING EXPLANATIONS

Although the Ankara rumor mill has long speculated about Ecevit's health, he had until recently been looking much better. While Rahsan Ecevit boasted that the visible improvement was a testimony to the care she was bestowing on her husband, others claimed that the remarkable transformation was the product of a reported cortisone treatment and warned of possible side effects. The discrepancies relating to the prime minister's health were essentially ignored until Ecevit was suddenly hospitalized on May 4. Minister of Health Osman Durmus, immediately claimed that Ecevit was in intensive care. Ecevit effectively contradicted Durmus and others concerned with his condition by checking out for home the very next day. Claiming that he was suffering only from a minor ailment, Ecevit said that he was getting better and would soon return to work. He was clearly minimizing his problems, however, and exaggerating the likelihood of

a speedy recuperation. Obligated to conduct his weekly meeting with President Ahmet Necdet Sezer at home - "in his pyjamas" according to Sezer - Ecevit also moved his meetings with the Speaker of the TGNA, Omer Izgi, the Chief Of Staff General Huseyin Kivrikoglu, and the Turkish Cypriot President Rauf Denktas to his residence during the two weeks of his confinement to home. Significantly, however, he failed to arrange face-to-face meetings with Bahceli, Yilmaz or other members of his cabinet.

Although Rahsan Ecevit issued predictably reassuring statements on a daily basis, the Prime Minister told Sedat Ergin of Hurriyet on May 15, that while he had not had any medical treatment since leaving hospital, he was suffering from "a severe pain in his back." After explaining that he had "hit his back against the wall very hard" in what he described was "an accident almost like falling down," Ecevit acknowledged that this new account of his ailment contradicted the previous explanation. "Naturally, different interpretations could be made," Ecevit commented. Although Mrs. Ecevit was quoted the following day as saying once again that her husband was getting better and that he would go to Pakistan and Afghanistan as scheduled on May 25, Ecevit's doctors, who had reportedly been kept away by Rahsan Ecevit, made an unscheduled house call and essentially forced Ecevit back into medical care.

GENIE OUT OF THE BOTTLE?

On May 21, Ecevit chaired a meeting in hospital with Bahceli and Yilmaz, who both hold the rank of deputy prime minister, along with the third deputy prime minister, Husamettin Ozkan of the DLP. The first part of the meeting, which included Foreign Minister Ismail Cem and a number of senior officials from his ministry, was devoted to an apparently inconclusive review of the outstanding issues in Turkey's campaign to satisfy the conditions for EU membership. This was followed by a private discussion between Ecevit and the other leaders on the current political situation. Afterwards the leaders tried to quash the speculation relating to the possibility of Ecevit's departure from office. In a written statement, they reaffirmed that the government would "continue to work in harmony" and demanded "the termination of discussion on early elections initiated by certain circles for the benefit of the country as well as the economy." They also underlined the determination of the government to "take all measures to ensure that the laws that were on its agenda and necessary for economic reform would speedily be ratified by the parliament in June."

Two days later, Ecevit expressed satisfaction with the "calm" reaction of the country and the markets to his medical problems and the talk of early elections. Although the Turkish investors had initially reacted negatively to his return to hospital, they had indeed adjusted quickly with both the stock market and the lira recovering. Nevertheless, questions continued to linger in the minds of investors, as well as the public at large, not least because it was none other than Kemal Dervis, the Minister of State for the Economy, brought in a year ago by Ecevit to deal with the economic crisis, who, in essence, "let the genie out of the bottle" by initiating the current discussion of early elections.

In a statement to a prominent columnist within days of Ecevit's original hospitalization, Dervis openly contradicted the government's policy of opposition to elections before April 2004, at the end of the current parliamentary term. Dismissing the coalition leaders' argument that early elections would undermine the implementation of the IMF-backed economic program, Dervis said that it would be "wrong to delay elections for much longer" and added that he "doubted whether the leaders themselves believed what they were saying on delaying the elections." Arguing that the economy was now "on a firm footing," Dervis said that the worst thing from the point of view of the economic program was "a continuation of the political uncertainty." A subsequent and widely publicized lunch meeting with U.S. Ambassador Robert Pearson, which prompted wild speculation that Dervis was given advance warning by Pearson of Ecevit's imminent resignation which would clear the way for early elections in November 2002, further fueled speculation that

Dervis was openly maneuvering to enter politics despite immediate and categorical denials by both Dervis and the U.S. Embassy.

It was noteworthy that Dervis chose this period of political uncertainty to also make a highly unusual and widely praised Istanbul speech to a conference of young voters organized by the Ari Group and the International Republican Institute. He argued that the economy should “no more feel on the brink of a crisis each time there is political turmoil.” At the same time, Dervis continued to defend his controversial views on early elections against almost universal opposition from the business community as well as his cabinet colleagues. The head of the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association (TUSIAD), Tuncay Ozilhan, who had previously fully supported Dervis, said that even discussion of early elections would “destroy the stability of the economic program” and that elections would “turn Turkey into Argentina.” Bahçeli, who, along with his NAP colleagues, had never hidden his distaste for Dervis and his *modus operandi*, made the caustic comment on May 23, that Dervis had first to run for office in order to be able to ascertain the impact of elections on the economy. Ecevit also distanced himself from Dervis by saying on the same day that the “personal views” Dervis had expressed on early elections had been “dismissed at the leaders’ meeting”. However, for its part, the IMF carefully refrained from getting involved in the argument despite the great efforts of the Turkish media to get a comment from Juha Kahkonen who led an IMF review mission to Turkey during Ecevit’s illness.

MANEUVERING FOR SUCCESSION

Although Dervis appears to be isolated, it needs to be remembered that he has been able to win almost every battle he has fought since returning to Turkey. Dubbed “the fourth member of the coalition,” Dervis effectively forced Communications Minister Enis Oksuz of the NAP and Minister of State Yuksel Yalova of the MP to resign as he vigorously defended the economic program he put together to obtain additional credit from the IMF. However, although it is apparent that he intends to transform his success in managing the economy and popularity into political capital, as Dervis told an interviewer, he is “unsure how he might enter politics.” Although both Yilmaz and Deniz Baykal, the leader of the Republican People’s Party (RPP), have openly hinted that they would welcome him into their ranks, Dervis has been unwilling to accept their invitation, thus implying that he might prefer to wait to see whether Ecevit would give him “the nod” to take over the DLP. Although Dervis turned down an invitation by Ecevit to join the DLP last year, changing circumstances may have also changed Dervis’s mind.

If Dervis is planning to enter politics through the DLP, it is likely that he will seek to build on his relationship with Ozkan. After all, Dervis is not a member of the DLP or the TGNA where Ozkan exercises great influence with Ecevit’s backing. For his part, Ozkan, whom Dervis has called “his tutor in politics,” may also see advantages in such cooperation. Ozkan has rightly been recognized not only as Ecevit’s closest and most loyal colleague, as he demonstrated during the bitter and costly argument with Sezer in February 2001, but also as the crucial element in ensuring the continuation of the government through three difficult years because of his extraordinary ability to solve intra-coalition problems. Although he is reported to have excellent relations with the military establishment and the business community, as well as with the powerful Turkish media, Ozkan lacks Dervis’s experience and skills in the international arena.

However, Ozkan would surely not make any move relating to the post–Ecevit era without his leader’s full blessing. Moreover, obtaining Ecevit’s approval at some future date will probably require the elimination of the reported reservations of Rahsan Ecevit relating to Ozkan. It may be significant that the DLP Central Office, which is close to Mrs. Ecevit, recently denounced “the open treason” of unnamed individuals who were “taking advantage of the prime minister’s illness” to “play various games.” Equally significantly,

Ozkan felt prompted to deny any problems with Mrs. Ecevit after widespread media criticism of her “negligence” during Ecevit’s illness. Reiterating his standard line that “he had come with Ecevit and would leave with him,” Ozkan said on May 23, that “unlike other people” he had no personal political ambitions. Clearly, the DLP leadership race is not yet open and, when it is, Rahsan Ecevit herself, along with other potential successors reportedly favored by her, such as Minister of State Sukru Gurel, Cem, or even candidates “who have not had a chance to bring themselves to prominence,” as Ecevit has put it, may also be in the running.

POLITICS BEYOND THE DLP

The current political impasse is due not only to the DLP’s inability to produce an alternative leader as long as Ecevit wants to continue, but also to the fact that his withdrawal would create major difficulties for the current coalition. To begin with, the constitution would require Ecevit’s successor in the DLP to form a new government assuming that Sezer duly designates him. Moreover, the NAP which has 127 seats in the 550 member TGNA – only one less than the DLP – may be willing to accept the leadership of the DLP in the coalition only as long as Ecevit continues in office. In fact, Bahceli, who has forged an unexpectedly close working relationship with Ecevit, has made it clear that the NAP reserves the right to claim the post of prime minister in the event of Ecevit’s withdrawal. It is likely that the NAP would also open its doors to potential defectors from other parties to strengthen its claim to the top job. However, it is far from certain whether the DLP would then reciprocate the NAP’s loyal cooperation during the past three years. Moreover, the MP, which is the junior partner in the coalition with 79 seats, has been openly squabbling with the NAP, in particular on political reforms demanded by the EU, and would almost certainly oppose Bahceli becoming prime minister. Consequently, Ecevit’s eventual departure from the political scene could also unglue the current coalition with unpredictable consequences.

It is fortunate for the government that the opposition cannot take immediate advantage of its problems. The three opposition parties represented in the TGNA – the True Path Party (TPP), the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and the Contentment Party (CP) – have been reduced to criticizing from the political sidelines because of their inability to bring down the government in the TGNA. While they have been calling on a daily basis for early elections, the opposition parties realize that the TGNA decision necessary to proceed to early elections will not be taken as long as the members of the coalition fear the wrath of the electorate. According to most opinion polls, the coalition parties face the risk of failing to pass the 10 percent national electoral threshold for representation in the TGNA, although the danger to the NAP appears to be less than that faced by its two partners.

Sooner or later elections will take place, however, and it is clear from the opinion polls, as well as the demonstration of public support at its mass meetings, that the JDP could take full advantage of the government’s mismanagement of the economy and its other problems to head the pack. According to the latest ANAR poll conducted in March, the JDP is the leading party with 22.8. The prospect of a JDP success in the elections has predictably caused concern within the Turkish establishment, especially in the very influential Turkish armed forces, which sees the JDP and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as a possible threat to the secular nature of Turkey. After all, its detractors argue, the JDP was established by former members of the Islamist Virtue Party (VP) after it was closed down by the Constitutional Court in 2001. However, in a speech he made at CSIS last January, as well as in subsequent speeches, Erdogan downplayed the likelihood of the JDP facing problems similar to those which had led to the closing down of the VP as well as other Islamist parties. Erdogan argued that the JDP was not the successor to the VP and implied that this politically risky honor belonged to the CP. Notwithstanding Erdogan’s confidence, the Constitutional Court ruled last month that Erdogan’s earlier conviction for religious incitement, which had

led to a four month incarceration, barred him from being elected to the TGNA and thus further stoked the speculation that Erdogan and the JDP would not be allowed to come to power.

If Erdogan does manage to overcome the obstacles to his leading the JDP into the elections, the other parties will somehow have to find a way to challenge his appeal to the voters. Dervis's moves, together with the recent assumption by Mehmet Ali Bayar, an able and youthful former diplomat, of the leadership of the small Democratic Turkey Party with an appeal to "the reasonable majority," suggest that both the center left and the center right have fresh alternatives available. With the ossification of the Turkish political system, however, it seems almost certain that veteran party leaders who have been around for a long time, like Mesut Yilmaz of the MP, Tansu Ciller of the TPP and Deniz Baykal of the RPP, will lead their parties into elections. Nevertheless, while the MP looks to be in serious trouble, the SONAR opinion poll of April, which gave the RPP 16.8 percent and the TPP 14.45 percent, suggests that the RPP's failure to enter the TGNA in the 1999 elections and the TPP's exclusion from government are likely to favor these two parties in the next elections. However, it seems unlikely that the electoral test of the popularity of the Turkish political parties can take place until the resolution of the problems relating to the ushering in of the post-Ecevit era.

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