

TURKEY UPDATE

August 4, 2003

REFORMING FOR EUROPE

As Ankara struggled through its typically hot summer, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) was hard at work. The Justice and Development Party (JDP) government, which has 366 seats in the 550-member TGNA, pushed through major legislative packages tied to European Union (EU) requirements for eventual Turkish membership just before its two-month legislative break on August 1. Parallel to its efforts related to its declared primary objective of EU membership, the government also managed to successfully conclude the fifth IMF review, leading to the release of a \$500 million tranche and the easing of the debt repayment schedule by the IMF, while endeavoring to repair the crucial relationship with the US.

The sixth EU reform package was submitted by the government to the TGNA on June 12, despite a letter by General Tuncer Kilinc, the Secretary General of the National Security Council (NSC) warning that its provisions would “encourage separatism and terrorism.” The package, which combined further liberalization measures directed at Kurdish-speaking citizens with the loosening of the strict anti-terror laws, was duly approved by the TGNA on June 19. Although it was then vetoed by President Ahmet Necdet Sezer on June 30 on the grounds that the provision relating to the removal of the anti-terror act would “create important dangers to the existence of the Turkish state,” the government promptly resubmitted the package to the TGNA, which gave its second, veto-proof approval on July 15.

At the same time as it was finalizing the sixth package, the TGNA was also considering a bill to grant conditional amnesty for some members of PKK and its successor KADEK, which engaged in Kurdish separatism and terrorism, based in northern Iraq. Although the leadership of the organizations was deliberately excluded, the bill sought to “restore to society” militants who had not participated in operations, while providing reduced sentences to those who had. Significantly, in order to convince reluctant JDP parliamentarians to support the bill, Erdogan stressed coordination with the Turkish General Staff (TGS), saying, “How can you know better than the TGS? They would know best. They want it this way. So, vote accordingly.” The bill was duly approved on July 29.

REDEFINING CIVILIAN-MILITARY RELATIONS

On the very day the sixth package was approved, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul confirmed the government’s intention to immediately proceed to an even more significant seventh package. Although the package aimed at a fundamental restructuring of the NSC, the government pointedly refrained from canvassing the views of Kilinc. However, it provided a draft to the TGS in the person of the Chief of Staff, General

Hilmi Ozkok. Following private negotiations between the government and the TGS, some changes were made to the original package before its submission to the TGNA on July 23. The main government concession apparently related to the removal of the provision restricting statutory military participation at the NSC meetings only to the Chief of Staff. However, other key provisions, including the authorization of the nomination of a civilian instead of the automatic appointment of a four-star general as NSC Secretary General and the organization of the NSC meetings on a bi-monthly basis instead of each month, were retained. Crucially, an additional provision was inserted at the last minute giving the responsibility for monitoring and coordinating the implementation of the NSC recommendations to one of the deputy prime ministers.

Kilinc, who technically reported to the Prime Minister but in reality spoke and acted on a whole range of issues independently, made a last ditch-effort to prevent the curtailment of the powers of the NSC. On July 14, he sent another letter to Erdogan – with a copy to President Sezer - setting out his objections in detail and predicting that the NSC Secretary General would be “unable to function effectively in the future.” When his warnings were ignored, one of Kilinc’s numerous advisers at the NSC followed up an apparently stormy discussion of the bill at the TGNA Justice Committee on July 29 by declaring that the measure would lead “to the dissolution of the NSC Secretariat in three months.” Undaunted, the TGNA approved the package on July 30 and sent it to Sezer for his approval.

Although Erdogan subsequently acceded to Ozkok’s reported request to refrain from the appointment of a civilian NSC Secretary General for at least one more year, the long-term effects of the legislation on the Turkish political system cannot be overestimated. During the past twenty years of its four-decade existence, the NSC had expanded its powers far beyond its original advisory role. Its impact on policy and politics were not always as obvious as at the famous February 1997 NSC meeting, which proved critical in the military establishment’s successful campaign to push the Islamist-led coalition out of office. However, the broad scope of the monthly NSC meetings, which brought the civilian and military leaderships together to review the most important issues on Turkey’s agenda, combined with the virtually unsupervised daily activities of the NSC Secretariat, created, in essence, a supra-governmental body with immense powers. Consequently, the reduction of the NSC profile and the powers of the NSC Secretariat are certain to enhance the authority of Turkey’s elected governments while reversing the steady expansion of the influence of the Turkish armed forces in non-military affairs.

Four interventions leading to changes in government in just over forty years - along with innumerable lower-intensity interventions in policymaking – have underlined the seriousness of the Turkish military with respect to its role as the guardian as well as the defender of the Turkish Republic. The reality is that even with its overwhelming parliamentary majority and strong public support, the JDP government would not have been able to proceed with its effort to curb the influence of the military in the administration of the country without the willingness of the current TGS leadership to accept the inevitability of reform. Through his cooperation with the government on this issue, Ozkok has sent an undeniable signal that under his leadership, the TGS is prepared to accept the rearrangement of the relationship between the nation’s armed forces and the civilian administration to move towards conformation with EU standards. The TGS is the inheritor and defender of the Kemalist commitment to Westernization, accession to the EU would be the culmination of the long process to achieve full Turkish membership of the Western community of nations, and, by not rejecting change, Ozkok has confirmed that the TGS recognizes the importance of avoiding the perception that it is an impediment on the path to the EU.

However, Ozkok’s willingness to seek a compromise with the JDP government on reform stands in sharp contrast

to the views articulated most vocally by Kilinc. Ozkok has been obliged to publicly deny growing discontent on the part of “young officers” with the JDP government because of its alleged weakening of Turkey’s commitment to secularism. Despite undeniable differences within the armed forces, Ozkok appears to have effective control over the military hierarchy which, barring a major unexpected reversal, he will head for three more years before his scheduled retirement. With Kilinc entering mandatory retirement this month, Ozkok’s task is surely easier than before.

THE THORNY PATH AHEAD

With the momentous domestic reforms, the government is hoping that the onus for action will now shift from Ankara to the EU. To be sure, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement Guenther Verheugen responded favorably to the seventh package by congratulating Gul and acknowledging that “the passage of the reforms through parliament shows the strong determination of the Turkish government to get in shape for EU membership.” However, it is still not clear whether the reforms will be sufficient to impel the EU to proceed to accession negotiations with Turkey as the JDP government confidently expects. Parallel to all the other important considerations, which will ultimately determine the definitive EU response to Turkey in December 2004, Cyprus continues to loom over the integration process even though the solution of the long-running Cyprus problem is not a specified condition for Turkish entry.

Following the collapse of the negotiations over the Annan peace plan in Copenhagen in December 2002 and the Hague in March 2003, the Cyprus peace process has been effectively stalled. Although support for the UN peace efforts is an integral part of the JDP government’s national program for EU entry which was released on July 25, and Erdogan and Gul have repeatedly declared that they have “not rejected” the Annan plan, Turkish Cypriot President Rauf Denktas remains resolutely opposed to any further discussion of a plan he has declared to be “dead.” Consequently, it remains to be seen whether the JDP government will be any more successful than in its earlier efforts in persuading Denktas and his powerful backers in the Turkish military establishment and civilian bureaucracy to modify their stance. Its failure to do so will ensure an unchallenged unilateral entry by the Greek Cypriots into the EU in the name of the entire island in May 2004, and it seems inconceivable that their presence in the EU will not then constitute an almost insurmountable obstacle to Turkey’s own membership. As Verheugen reportedly underlined during his trip to Athens, Nicosia, and Ankara in mid-June that if the Cyprus problem is not solved, the Turks should forget about the EU.

It is important to note that it is not just the Europeans but also the Americans who are reminding Turkey of the need to solve the Cyprus issue before May 2004. During the fence-mending trips by the Undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry, Ugur Ziyal on June 15-18 and Gul on July 22-26, the US officials underlined their support for the Annan plan. However, neither the Cyprus issue nor Turkey’s EU efforts, which the Bush Administration supports, were at the top of the agenda in the Turkish visits to Washington. The TGNA vote on March 1 denying the US a northern front against Saddam Hussein, and the July 4 detention of Turkish special forces by the US military in northern Iraq had shaken the relationship between the two countries and the JDP government has been trying to reverse the process. However, with Erdogan’s confirmation just before the Gul visit of a US request for a Turkish military contribution to the difficult post-war stabilization effort in Iraq, the US-Turkish rapprochement has been inevitably indexed to the troop issue. After his return to Turkey following high-profile meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell, Gul told a Turkish newspaper that it would be “very, very bad” if Turkey did not send forces

to Iraq. Although it has since become clear that the government will not move quickly on this issue for fear of another costly TGNA rebuff, it seems unlikely that the JDP government will long be able to avoid a similar showdown. With the US publicly pressing for “a prompt decision,” the JDP government may be set on a collision course with the same forces that prevented the passage of the March 1 resolution, including President Sezer and the opposition Republican People’s Party as well as significant sections of its own parliamentary group and voters. However, if and when he decides to make a high-risk move on this issue, Erdogan will undoubtedly seek the unambiguous support of Ozkok and the TGS. Their reluctance to provide such support may have swayed the result of the vote while damaging the special relationship between the TGS and the Pentagon.

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