

November 01, 1996

Turkey in Growing Distress

The failure of the Turkish opposition to bring down the government through a parliamentary vote of censure on October 17 suggests at first glance that the controversial coalition between the Islamist Welfare Party (WP) and the center-right True Path Party (TPP) may be set for a longer stay in office than its opponents, and maybe even some of its supporters, predicted. After their successful performance in the municipal elections on November 4 — the WP and the TPP each polled around 30% of the vote — Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and Deputy Prime Minister Tansu Ciller are certainly trying to foster that impression. However, while nothing should come as a surprise in the increasingly turbulent world of Turkish politics, it still seems unlikely that the coalition will be able to serve out the remainder of the current parliamentary term which comes to an end in the year 2000.

The Libyan Diversion

The test of strength in the Turkish National Assembly was prompted by Erbakan's most recent controversial foreign trip. Having ruffled feathers within Turkey as well as abroad by going to Iran to sign a \$23 billion gas deal in August, Erbakan insisted on visiting Libya — reportedly against the advice of the Turkish Ambassador in Tripoli — along with Egypt and Nigeria. He was rewarded by a stinging lecture by the unpredictable Libyan leader about the need "for a Kurdish state under the Middle Eastern sun." The general outrage in Turkey that followed the incident was fueled to a great extent by the secular media, which saw an opportunity to bring down a government it had opposed from the outset. The three main opposition parties — the Motherland Party (MP) along with the two Social Democratic parties — then agreed to merge their separate motions into the one that ultimately failed to carry.

A New Crisis

However, there is another parliamentary test of strength on the horizon triggered by an emerging scandal that has already prompted the resignation of Interior Minister Mehmet Agar, a close associate of Ciller. A fatal accident on November 3 involving a car carrying a TPP member of the National Assembly, a former police chief and an individual being sought by Interpol for involvement in the assassination attempt against the Pope as well as other serious crimes, has led to accusations about the existence of "a criminal cell at the heart of the state" that Agar's departure has not eradicated. The WP, which has been portraying itself as the prime defender of moral values in pursuit of its goal of "a just order," has been forced into embarrassing silence, predictably focusing on trying to preserve the coalition. However, its failure to respond to the clearest possible evidence yet of the extent of corruption in the country further fuels the widespread sense of hopelessness and exacerbation with the current system. In fact, even if the coalition manages to muddle through the current crisis, there is certain to be a growing chorus for a "clean hands operation" similar to

what happened in Italy — or possibly something even more dramatic on the lines of recent events in Pakistan.

Opposition Disarray

The survival of the coalition is due as much to the disarray in the opposition ranks and its continuing failure to present a credible alternative to the current arrangement as to the strength of the WP-TPP partnership. The two center-left parties, the Democratic Left Party (DLP) and the Republican People's Party (RPP), have continued to dissipate their energies in their arcane internecine squabble as well as in interminable intra-party dissension. Bulent Ecevit's autocratic domination of the DLP — in every sense his own creation — has begun to fray at the edges, and the resignation of the deputy leader, Mumtaz Soysal, has not stilled the waters. The RPP, which barely achieved the percentage of votes required for representation in the National Assembly in the December elections, has not fully recovered from that major reversal and a challenge to Deniz Baykal's leadership may not be far away. As for the defectors from the TPP, their continuing failure to follow through on their promise to establish a new party underlines their inability to make the kind of headway that they, along with their sympathizers, had anticipated.

However, the primary blame for the impotence of the opposition must be laid at the door of Mesut Yilmaz, the leader of the MP. Having effectively forced the dissolution of the previous TPP-MP coalition, which he headed, by pursuing corruption charges against Ciller, Yilmaz had then been obliged to watch from the sidelines as Ciller essentially denied her political *raison d'être* by entering into a coalition with the Islamists. Yilmaz was nonetheless able to dissuade his most powerful opponents within the party from challenging him at the MP Congress in August. He had then defeated his sole opponent, Isin Celebi, by promising to change himself as well as the MP in time for his imminent return to power. However, three months later, with the improbable WP-TPP coalition still in office, he appears to be haplessly following events and failing to impose himself on the political agenda. Moreover, it is not clear whether he is willing or indeed able to transform his image from a man incapable of winning elections or to hang on to political power, or to restore the image of the late Turgut Ozal's MP as the party with the solutions to Turkey's many problems.

The growing discontent within MP has led a senior MP parliamentarian to join the WP, and there are rumors that others might follow. With the disastrous showing by the MP in the municipal elections — it received only 8% of the vote — galvanizing Yilmaz' many opponents, it finally seems that they might be able to bring him down if only they could agree on a single challenger. Needless to say, such a development could begin the process that would break the political logjam and clear the way for the long-desired TPP-MP union on the center-right that might well beat the WP in the next elections.

The Shaky Coalition

While the prospect of imminent political execution concentrated the minds of the coalition parties wonderfully in the recent parliamentary vote of confidence, the coalition continues to rest precariously on a weak foundation. It has to be remembered that the coalition was constructed on Tansu Ciller's need for political insurance against investigation of her alleged misdeeds, and the parliamentary commissions looking at the allegations are scheduled due to end in December. In any case, the coalition is now assured of only 278 votes in the National Assembly, a majority of only three, with continuing ideological differences between the two coalition partners. There are also fissures within the TPP relating to cooperation with the WP that were only partially papered over by the solidarity displayed during the vote. For example, that the two TPP defectors in the vote of confidence were both female — they have subsequently resigned from the party — testifies to the lingering negative attitude of secular Turkish women to the current coalition. It is also revealing that two TPP parliamentarians who are scions of prominent Turkish business families also could not bring themselves to vote with their TPP colleagues.

For his part, Erdogan is still making a series of tactical adjustments, or as his detractors might put it, astonishing volte faces, which also serve to keep friction with the strongly secular military establishment to a minimum. Erdogan's new superpragmatic approach was on display during the recent WP Congress in which the green flags of Islam and Islamic exhortations in Arabic were replaced by the Turkish flags and frequent references to the founder of the Turkish secular state, Ataturk. Clearly, there is a general consensus in the WP that Erdogan should be supported even if he is taking a circuitous route to the common goals. In the meanwhile, the WP is using government patronage to strengthen its position in the political system by rewarding its supporters in the business world and to bring into the bureaucracy its followers. However, there are clear signs that Erdogan's tactics have started to alienate at least some of his core believers.

Confusing Foreign Policy Signals

The foreign policy outlook remains as unsettled as the domestic picture. Turkey's relations with the outside world are clearly going through a period of flux without a clear pattern. The fact that Erdogan's visits have been exclusively to Islamic countries testifies to the general desire of the WP for a strengthening of relations primarily with the Moslem countries, not the fellow Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Meanwhile, the TPP leader has been assiduously assuring her Western counterparts who prefer to maintain a relationship with her rather than with her coalition partner, that there have been no changes in Turkey's bedrock commitment to the West. So far, the WP appears willing to utilize Ciller's residual western connections while continuing its policy of compromise, such as extending Operation Provide Comfort and allowing the military establishment to expand its cooperation agreement with Israel.

The Looming Economic Hurdle

However, the big test still ahead remains the economy, and more specifically the ongoing negotiations with the IMF. Having vilified the IMF and condemned the willingness of previous governments to adhere to conditions laid down by the IMF while it was in opposition, the WP is understandably finding it difficult to come to terms with the need to sign a stand-by agreement with the IMF. The recently concluded visit by an IMF delegation to Ankara has predictably proved to be inconclusive and a return visit is due in January.

In the meanwhile, the economic conundrum remains unchanged. Turkey needs fresh funds to pay maturing foreign loans and interest and cannot raise it through public sector borrowing in view of the alarming size of the internal debt. However, it also cannot raise it on the international market without the IMF stamp of approval. The IMF is unwilling to compromise its universal guidelines for such an agreement, not least for fear of undermining its bargaining position in its ongoing negotiations with other countries. While Ciller has been pressing Erdogan to move towards an agreement, it is still not clear whether the WP would jeopardize its standing with its millions of supporters at the bottom end of the economic scale by agreeing to a tightening of the national economic belt or whether it would ever maintain such an agreement. However, what is clear is that without such an agreement, or the emergency measures suggested in the most recent Standard & Poor's report, the Turkish economy will sooner or later face an economic crisis that could rival that of 1994.

Bulent Aliriza
Senior Associate

Zeyno Baran
Research Associate