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The Government Falters

Ever since the extraordinary nine-hour meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) at the end of February, which saw the presentation to the governing Islamist Welfare Party (WP)-True Path Party (TPP) coalition of an 18-point list of measures to reinforce the secular system, the Necmettin Erbakan-Tansu Çiller partnership has not been in effective control of Turkey. Although the two leaders have continued to demonstrate stubborn determination — along with astonishing myopia in recognizing the untenable nature of their position — it seems inevitable that the steadily increasing pressure, emanating mainly from the military establishment, will lead to the collapse of the government sooner rather than later.

The past year has shown that secular Turkish society was not ready for an Islamist party in power and that the WP itself was not fully prepared for government. In fact, having the WP in office but not in power, constantly compromising its declared principles while polarizing Turkish society, has brought into question the legitimacy of the entire Islamist movement. Consequently, if the current coalition manages to somehow hobble along, it is all too likely that the Turkish political system itself will come under pressure.

Military Pressure on the Coalition

It is no exaggeration to say that the current political struggle is over no less than the future of the system bequeathed by Kemal Ataturk, creator of the Turkish Republic. The armed forces see themselves as guardians of the Kemalist reforms at the foundation of the Turkish state and, in particular, secularism. Accordingly, they moved in February to confront the Islamist-led coalition headed by Prime Minister Erbakan at the NSC, which brings together the top five civilians — the president, the prime minister, the foreign minister, the interior minister, and the defense minister — with the top five military commanders. The weeks following the February 28 meeting have, in essence, been a grace period for the politicians to either implement the proposed measures or fashion an alternative government that would do so. If anything, however, the Turkish political scene has become even more confused and unpredictable.

On the TPP side of the coalition, Tansu Çiller has been scrambling to try to bridge the growing gap between the military establishment and the WP. While she was able to persuade Erbakan to sign the NSC document after a symbolically significant two-day delay on his part, the absence of concrete moves to implement the measures has made it progressively more difficult for her to placate either the Turkish General Staff (TGS) or the closet malcontents within her party who fear the ultimate consequences of the failure to address the concerns of the TGS. Although there have been indications that Çiller might be prepared to abandon her coalition partner to preserve her own position — she reportedly made an abortive offer in April to resume the ill-fated partnership with Mesut Yilmaz and his Motherland Party (MP) under her leadership — ultimately she plumped for a continuation of the current arrangement. But with the

resignation of two of her senior ministers, Yalim Erez and Yildirim Aktuna, hours before the April NSC meeting, it strains credulity to believe that Çiller can maintain her tightrope act for much longer.

The WP, as befits its highly disciplined and hierarchical traditions, has been able to maintain a more united front during this difficult period. Erbakan and his closest aides have sought to maintain their grasp on power by keeping the partnership with the TPP intact while stressing to their party colleagues that implementation of the NSC measures is out of the question. Clearly, the most troubling NSC demand for WP members is educational reform, which threatens the future of religious schools. Consequently, Erbakan's reported willingness to implement this particular demand after the issue was raised again at the April NSC meeting seems to ensure internal party strife. Erbakan, for his part, has continued to assure the WP that the issue can still be blocked in the National Assembly.

Worsening Contradictions

The case from the outset against the strange political coupling between the veteran Islamic leader and Çiller was that a government built on such glaring contradictions would only exacerbate the inherent contradictions in Turkish society itself. The first six months of the coalition suggested that such fears may have perhaps been exaggerated, despite periodic stumbles such as Erbakan's forays to international pariahs like Libya and Iran. The WP leadership shrewdly tried to mollify the military's displeasure by raising their salaries, accepting the expulsion of a number of military officers for "religious activities," and learning to live with the Turco-Israeli military agreement it had previously opposed.

These policies generated resentment in WP ranks, and Erbakan was obliged to move to satisfy his supporters. But his actions tended, in turn, to anger the military. These included the flaunting of the WP's open links with the Islamic sects, previously banned by Ataturk; permitting women to wear head scarves in state offices, contrary to the provisions of Ataturk's dress code; irresponsible talk of "reconquering Istanbul" by building a huge new mosque at the heart of the city; and, finally, calls for the application of Islamic law (Sharia) at a meeting in Sincan, prompting the movement of tanks that rattled both windows along the route and the entire Turkish political establishment.

In fact, a statement by Chief of Staff Ismail Hakki Karadayi had revealed the attitude of the military as far back as September 1996. He warned that "the Iranian military had recognized the true face of the Islamists only after it was too late." A few weeks later, he declared that events in Afghanistan had to be a lesson for Turks. Less subtle warnings followed, with Admiral Guven Erkaya and General Cevik Bir declaring that "Islamic fundamentalism was a bigger threat than the PKK." Given the vigor with which the TGS has fought the PKK over the past decade, a major confrontation seemed inevitable. It came in February. The month began with tanks rolling through Sincan, a suburb of Ankara, in a show of force after a display of radical Islamic sentiment at a ceremony attended by the Iranian ambassador. The envoy, who was close to Prime Minister Erbakan and others in the WP, duly left the country after the military establishment publicly made clear that his continued presence was unwelcome. Tensions rose even higher with the NSC meeting on February 28, but with the main issue — the replacement of the current government — unresolved, the generals continued the war of attrition. Just before the April NSC meeting, a general stationed in Erzurum went so far as to call Erbakan "a pimp." It is noteworthy that Erbakan's formal demand for his punishment was publicly and decisively rejected by the chief of staff.

Buttressing Secularism

It is impossible to overstate the psychological impact of the June 1996 creation of the current coalition on the secular political-military establishment that had effectively governed Turkey since the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Although Erbakan and his National Salvation Party — the predecessor of the WP — had participated in coalitions in the 1970s, it was nevertheless very difficult for the secular elite to come to terms with Erbakan's role as prime minister. It was all the more galling for them to see Tansu

Çiller, once the leading opponent of "Islamic fundamentalism" in Turkey, facilitating Erbakan's transition from seemingly permanent opposition to government. Clearly, Çiller's desperate need for protection against parliamentary investigation of credible allegations of corruption as prime minister (1993-1995) had simply outweighed her vociferous opposition to the WP.

The decision of the Turkish military establishment to once again assume a determinant role in Turkish politics was the result of its conviction that the secular politicians were unable or unwilling to resist the WP's assault on the secular order. The center-right was divided, with Çiller and Mesut Yilmaz carrying the earlier Demirel-Ozal feud to absurd limits. With the center-left also divided, and the tiny Turco-Islamic Greater Unity Party helping the Erbakan-Çiller coalition survive one vote of confidence after another, the WP appeared to be solidly entrenched in power. Frustrated by the parliamentary stalemate, the military set out to redress the balance of secular/religious power. They secured the backing of President Demirel, who after twice being ousted from power by coups, knows the political costs of being on the wrong side of the military. They also obtained the support of the mass media, which had opposed the TPP-WP coalition from the beginning.

The goal of this steadily increasing military pressure has not been to change the WP — the TGS has little hope of that — or to get it to modify its policies. In any case, whatever the WP is willing to give to appease the military is insufficient. The TGS has instead focused on breaking the coalition through its junior secular partner. Predictably, Çiller has been resisting, making liberal use of patronage and financial incentives along with implicit threats to keep the potential defectors in the TPP in line. After denying for some time that there was any problem with the TGS, Çiller switched to public criticism of the military's thinly veiled calls for her withdrawal from the coalition. She defiantly proclaimed that the government would continue until the year 2000 while maneuvering unsuccessfully to take over as prime minister prior to the July 1998 date agreed to with Erbakan.

Çiller has even hinted at the possibility of early elections in an electoral alliance with the WP. Unlike all the other secular leaders, Çiller is certainly capable of giving the WP the opportunity to grow stronger through elections — especially if this is her only way out of her current predicament. Such a move in the current political climate would do nothing to resolve the underlying tensions and would leave the military even more anxious about the country's political future.

However, Çiller's task has not been getting easier. Although she put on a brave face after the testy February NSC meeting and trumpeted her success in obtaining Erbakan's signature on the document that emerged from the meeting, she has since found it more difficult to bridge the gap between the demands articulated by the military and what the WP might be willing to accept. The still-unresolved issue of religious schools is but the tip of a huge iceberg.

While Çiller has hitherto managed to frustrate opponents in her party and confounded the critics who continued to predict her political demise, her current challenge dwarfs her earlier problems. The military was genuinely angered by credible stories that she had seriously considered dismissing the entire military high command immediately after the February NSC meeting as well as by her provocative statement that the government "could not be brought down by tanks and guns."

What Next?

It seems likely that Turkish politics will be under military influence for some time. By avoiding direct intervention, with all of its consequences, and choosing instead the patient alternative of relying on pressure on the politicians to "re-engineer" the system, the Turkish military has demonstrated considerable sophistication. If a new government does emerge from the current political upheaval, it would most probably be an interim "National Reconciliation Government" involving three of the mainstream secular parties represented in the Grand National Assembly. The chief virtue of such a transitional arrangement is

that it would exclude the WP. The cabinet would most likely consist of politicians with technocrat backgrounds and strong secular credentials, working in close harmony with the president as well as the military establishment through the NSC.

Such a government would be able to claim that it is acting on behalf of the 80 percent of the Turkish electorate who voted for secular parties in the December 1995 elections. It would also benefit from the widespread sense of relief that would surely accompany the resolution of the current tension and uncertainty. And it would be able to capitalize on the WP's unwillingness to take a clear stand on the issue of corruption as well as on its bewildering series of tactical volte-faces. Its success and longevity, however, ultimately will depend on its economic policies as well as its ability to reduce the alarming polarization in Turkish politics.

An immediate issue that would confront such a government is change in the electoral system. As Lutfullah Kayalar, a prominent candidate to replace Mesut Yilmaz as the leader of the MP, said at his talk at CSIS on April 30, "Turkish society is ahead of the policymakers. The policymakers need to display the necessary courage and decisiveness to restructure the electoral laws to allow the people to express their desire for change through their votes, thus ending the current political instability." Most secular politicians are reluctant to move ahead with new elections as the current system, coupled with continuing political fragmentation, might permit the strengthening of the WP. Consequently, some have proposed a two-tier election system to enable candidates from different parties representing the secular majority to defeat the Islamic candidates in the second-round runoff. Others have suggested a transition to a presidential system, which would weaken the ability of a party with a plurality in the National Assembly to wield effective power.

While these ideas have been debated for several years, clearly the current impetus for reform springs from the advent of an Islamist-led government. A much-discussed corollary to the suggested electoral changes is that the center-right and center-left parties should coalesce into stronger and more viable political entities. It certainly seems possible that, despite years of destructive bickering between their leaders, intense pressure at a time of political ferment might finally forge cooperation and even alliances between the secular parties. Earlier attempts have failed, most notably the brief Çiller-Yilmaz coalition of 1996, because of rivalries between the leaders. If the current crop of secular leaders were to be forced to step aside — an extraordinarily difficult task in the autocratic Turkish party system — Turkish politics might then witness a healthy convergence on the secular side of the political fence. Yet, even as Turkish politics is refashioned, it is also important to ensure a role for a moderate Islamist party, albeit in opposition. The failure to undertake the long-term integration of the Islamist movement into the mainstream of Turkish politics will simply invite future problems.

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