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The Yilmaz Government at Six Months

Almost six months after the resignation of the Welfare Party-True Path Party (WP-TPP) partnership, which had brought Turkey to the brink of a coup, and its replacement by a three-party coalition headed by Mesut Yilmaz of the Motherland Party (MP), Turkey once again finds itself in political flux. With Yilmaz's two earlier stints as premier having failed to last more than a few months, speculation is rife in the turbulent world of Turkish politics that his current government will not be able to serve out the remainder of the parliamentary term which comes to an end in the year 2000. While the situation is not nearly as drastic as in the first half of the year, there is concern that even early elections may not resolve the inherent uncertainty.

The main problem is that for some time the normal rules governing politics elsewhere have not been operating in Turkey. The current coalition was cobbled together back in June not by the political skills of Yilmaz or the political program of the MP but rather by the unique circumstances prevailing at the time. "The unarmed coup," as it was termed, involving a sustained effort against the previous Islamist-led coalition by the media and a myriad of nongovernmental organizations, with the powerful military establishment lending its considerable muscle, had effectively made governing impossible for the Necmettin Erbakan-Tansu Ciller partnership, leaving only a choice between a government without the WP and the TPP or a possible coup.

In deference to the wishes of the architects of the "unarmed coup," the new government immediately showed its gratitude by passing the so-called eight year education bill through the Grand National Assembly (GNA). One of the main points of dispute between the military establishment and the previous government in the monthly National Security Council (NSC) meetings, this bill specifies eight years of compulsory state education, thereby preventing students from attending Islamic schools for three additional years. Despite the expectations and goodwill that had accompanied its formation, the coalition then began to flounder aimlessly.

AN UNWIELDY COALITION

Yilmaz heads a government which, in addition to the MP, includes the Democratic Left Party (DLP), led by Bulent Ecevit, and the Democratic Turkey Party (DTP), led by Husamettin Cindoruk. It is only assured of a majority in the GNA, however, with the votes of the Republican People's Party (RPP), headed by Deniz Baykal, who chose to stay out of the government after failing to get Yilmaz's agreement on the formation of a government that would quickly proceed to early elections. The make-shift nature of the coalition, a product of the common hostility of the four parties involved to the previous government, almost inevitably tends to accentuate disagreement as well as the legendary lassitude of Turkish bureaucrats.

The DLP remains focused on its interminable squabble with its fellow Social Democrats in the RPP, hardly a recipe designed to ensure continued RPP support for the government. In fact, Baykal, who fully reciprocates Ecevit's personal dislike for him, has made it clear that he is moving towards withdrawing his support when it is to the RPP's advantage to do so. The smallest coalition partner, the DTP, the refuge of defectors from the TPP, has become increasingly dissatisfied with its exclusion from much of day to day decisionmaking by its two coalition partners, as well as by its inability to loosen Ciller's continuing hold on its former colleagues in the TPP, and has been muttering about leaving the government. While the attitude of all these parties will play a major role in shaping the immediate future of Turkish politics, what happens next will ultimately depend on the personality and policies of Yilmaz.

POLITICAL CALCULATIONS

After provoking the dissolution of the short-lived TPP-MP coalition, which he had headed, Yilmaz had then been obliged to cool his heels for a whole year in opposition as the improbable WP-TPP coalition readily beat off his numerous parliamentary challenges. However, even as he failed to impose himself on the political agenda, Yilmaz somehow managed to retain control of his party, leaving him positioned for the unexpected catapult back into office.

It is apparent that Yilmaz has indexed the future of his government to the fate of the WP and Ciller. The case that was opened against the WP in the Constitutional Court last summer seems to be heading inexorably towards a decision to close the party that had received most votes in the December 1995 elections, with all its likely consequences within Turkey as well as in Turkey's relations with the outside world. At the same time, while the TPP leader struts around the country seemingly oblivious to the serious allegations swirling around her, Yilmaz is reported to be preparing to reopen the parliamentary case against her early in the new year. Once the WP and TPP are incapacitated, Yilmaz seems to believe, the MP will coast to an easy victory in parliamentary elections.

In the meanwhile, Yilmaz appears impervious to criticism that he is drifting and has achieved little of substance. His reluctance to move decisively — as he promised publicly — against the widespread and institutionalized corruption the Susurluk accident of November 1996 had revealed, has been accompanied by allegations of corruption against MP politicians and appointees. While Yilmaz talks about grandiose projects to deal with the looming energy shortage, the lack of a coherent, integrated energy policy, combined with the blatant favoring of certain companies and bureaucratic redtape, ensures the inevitability of electricity cuts in the coming months. Striking public sector employees have begun to march in the streets as the gap between the affluent haves and the growing number of have-nots widens.

The failure of the government to implement a viable economic program, involving large-scale privatization and the reduction of the almost three-digit annual inflation rate, has further weakened the Turkish currency, pushing the dollar/lira rate over the psychologically important 200,000 barrier and reducing Turkey's foreign reserves. Understandably, Yilmaz is finding it difficult to come to political terms with the need to sign a stringent one-year stand-by agreement with the IMF, and the economic conundrum remains unchanged.

Turkey needs fresh funds to pay maturing foreign loans and interest and cannot raise them through public sector borrowing in view of the alarming size of the internal debt. Neither can they be raised on the international market without the IMF stamp of approval. The IMF is unwilling to compromise its universal guidelines for Yilmaz for fear of undermining its bargaining position in negotiations with other countries. The impasse, which led to the resignation of the much-respected head of the treasury, Mahfi Egitmez, has provoked concern that the Turkish economy will once again face an economic crisis that could rival that of 1994. In the meanwhile, Yilmaz and his trusted, tough-talking minister of the economy, Gunes Taner, seem set on hobbling along with fiscally irresponsible populist policies until elections, probably as early as the spring or summer of 1998.

FOREIGN POLICY WOES

The foreign policy outlook remains equally unsettled. After the WP-TPP experience, the Yilmaz government's stated objective was to reaffirm Turkey's orientation towards the West and strengthen its links to the Turkic countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. In contrast to Erdogan, who had chosen Iran and Libya for his first visit abroad, Yilmaz's initial foreign trips were to Kazakhstan and Germany. Foreign Minister Ismail Cem visited a number of countries in Europe as well as the Caucasus, reasserting Turkey's significant geopolitical role in the region and lobbying for Turkey's admission into the European Union (EU).

The Yilmaz government has been unable, however, to put together the various and often conflicting strands into a coherent overall foreign policy involving the redefinition of Turkey's relations with the West in the post-Cold War world. As a result, the government has been pulled schizophrenically in different directions by competing pressures from within as well as without.

A major problem is the division of labor within the government. While the MP took over the economic portfolios, effective control over foreign policy was left to the DLP. With Foreign Minister Cem and the state minister responsible for the EU and Cyprus, Sukru Sina Gurel, both from the DSP, Bulent Ecevit's legendary suspicion of the West — some political observers have gone so far as to label Ecevit the "secular embodiment of Erdogan" — became an important factor in Turkish foreign policy. In fact, in the absence of a willingness by Yilmaz to counterbalance Ecevit, the latter's views are effectively shaping Turkish diplomacy.

TURKEY-EUROPE-UNITED STATES

Statements by EU leaders had long made it clear that improvements in human rights, democracy, the economy, and relations with Greece, along with movement on the Cyprus issue, were prerequisites for Turkey's admission to the EU. Failing to establish a modus vivendi with the Europeans on these issues, the Yilmaz Government chose instead to emphasize the dangers that would be posed to the EU itself by Turkey's exclusion. "The dialogue of the deaf" led almost inevitably to the decision by the EU to exclude Turkey from the list of candidates for admission at its summit in Luxembourg on December 12-13. Predictably, the Yilmaz government responded by rejecting the invitation to participate in a new forum, the European Conference, designed by the EU to keep Turkey tied to Europe in the absence of membership. Turkey also froze its membership application, suspended political talks with the EU, and announced that it will move ahead with integration with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as the EU moves ahead with accession talks with the Greek Cypriots. Although some of these decisions might be quietly reversed in the coming months, it is likely that the EU decision will help to accentuate the barely latent xenophobic and anti-Western sentiment in Turkey.

The situation is particularly precarious because the United States is in no position to satisfy Yilmaz's stated desire for a redressing of the balance with U.S. support. In fact, the U.S. is unwilling — and indeed unable — to carry the heavy burden of keeping Turkey tied to the West without the EU dimension. That is precisely why the U.S. had lobbied so energetically to get the EU-Turkish Customs Union concluded back in 1995 and also tried, albeit without success, to persuade the EU to be more accommodating to Turkey at Luxembourg. Moreover, the issues raised by the EU as obstacles to Turkish membership also happen to be permanent fixtures in talks between U.S. and Turkish officials and just as unlikely to be resolved in the Clinton-Yilmaz talks in Washington on December 19, as in the talks leading up to Luxembourg.

PIPELINE CONFUSION

There are also emerging U.S.-Turkish differences on cooperation in energy policy. The Clinton administration has long supported the construction of a Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline as a way of helping Turkey, while ensuring that Caspian oil would reach markets unhindered by Russia. U.S. Secretary of Energy Federico Pena recently visited Turkey to confirm U.S. support and to encourage the Turkish government to make concrete moves to make the project a reality. Continued dithering and confusing moves by Ankara, however, is raising concern in Washington that Turkey will miss this historic opportunity.

A number of powerful Turkish firms with major investments in Russia have succeeded in pulling the Yilmaz government into a closer energy relationship with Moscow, with immense and potentially negative consequences for Turkey's role in the transportation of Caspian oil and gas to markets. On December 15 Yilmaz concluded a major agreement in Ankara with visiting Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin to obtain additional natural gas from Russia through a pipeline under the Black Sea. While the deal makes good sense for Chernomyrdin, as well as his former company, Gazprom, it will surely make it even more difficult for Turkey to make the case that it should be the archstone in a U.S.-backed plan designed to prevent Russian domination over the transportation of Caspian energy resources.

Turkey's recently restated determination to move ahead with the Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey pipeline project, which may be sanctionable by the U.S. under the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, is equally perplexing. The U.S. administration has been trying to persuade Ankara to support an alternative Trans-Caspian pipeline to bring Turkmen gas to Turkey, and it is far from clear whether Turkey is still willing to cooperate with Washington on this alternative.

BEYOND ELECTIONS

It is clear that the problems of the Turkish political system are unlikely to be eradicated through early elections. In any case, Yilmaz first has to persuade a majority of MPs in the GNA, many of whom know that they may not be coming back to Ankara, to agree to a dissolution. Moreover, even if he were to succeed in doing so, Yilmaz would still enter elections saddled with the image of a leader unable to make tough decisions, hang on to political power or, even more crucially, win elections. His current term in office has done little to convince his critics that he has the vision to complete the work of Turgut Ozal, the founder of the MP, or to find a solution to any of Turkey's problems. While the MP certainly papered over some of its cracks in government, Yilmaz leads a party still riven by dissension and rivalries, uncertain of its mission and goals.

Moreover, even if the MP were able to take advantage of the political circumstances and emerge as the leading party after new elections, it would almost certainly be obliged to share power with one of the two Social Democratic Parties or even with the potentially resurgent National Action Party or the Greater Unity Party, on the far right. The political picture is further clouded by questions relating to the likely political successor to the WP, Ciller's political fortunes, and the TPP's relationship with the would-be inheritors in the DTP. Brimming with confidence, Baykal is fashioning an electoral strategy designed to bring the have-nots back to the RPP from the WP.

As a result, along with the ongoing debate about early elections, there is continuing debate about a more fundamental solution to the current political impasse. Open speculation in the first half of the year that a wholesale change of system was necessary to rescue Turkey from its political logjam has merely given way to a more discreet form of discussion about how this could best be achieved. Significantly, President Demirel, who used his constitutional power to elevate Yilmaz into office by frustrating the WP-TPP team's plans to switch the job of prime minister from Erbakan to Ciller, recently revived speculation about the need for a presidential or semi-presidential system. As always in Turkish politics, almost nothing can be said with certainty except that the uncertainty will persist.

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