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The Election Outlook

As Turkey enters the final days before parliamentary and municipal elections on April 18, there is a strange mood in the country. Turkish commentators note that Turkish political life is failing to exhibit the usual pre-election excitement.

The decision to hold elections more than 18 months before they were due was taken by an overwhelming Grand National Assembly (GNA) vote as far back as July 30, 1998. In contrast, the last general election took place on December 24, 1995, just two months after the GNA legislated new elections. The long hiatus forced the limits of the electorate's attention span, while allowing irresistible opportunities for intricate political maneuvering. Not surprisingly, a large number of Turkish voters continued to exhibit skepticism that the elections would actually take place as scheduled right up to the last minute.

LAST-MINUTE HITCH

In fact, the road to the polls was not finally cleared until March 22, when the GNA defeated a determined last-ditch attempt to delay the elections. The challenge was mounted by an ad hoc coalition of disgruntled parliamentarians from the two center-right parties, the Motherland Party (MP) and the True Path Party (TPP), who had been excluded from or given unattractively low slots on the party election slates that were personally finalized by the MP leader, Mesut Yilmaz, and the TPP leader, Tansu Ciller. Joining forces with the Islamist Virtue Party (VP), which controlled the largest block of seats in the legislature, they forced the GNA to return into session and then to vote on a motion to postpone the elections.

The dissidents were strongly opposed by the Democratic Left Party (DLP), which had eventually formed the current minority government in early January after the previous MP-DLP coalition had been forced out of office last November over corruption. The MP and the TPP, which temporarily set aside their bitter rivalry, as well as any concern they may have about the elections, supported the DLP, which is convinced that it will do extremely well in the polls. Nevertheless, the effort, which was largely orchestrated by Yalim Erez, the former TPP parliamentarian who had been an independent member in the MP-DLP government and who had tried unsuccessfully to form a government in December, looked for a while as if it might succeed. The dissidents took heart from the perceptible ambivalence of President Demirel, who said, "delaying the elections would not be the end of the world," as well as from rumors that the effort had the backing of the armed forces. The involvement in the effort of the small Democratic Turkey Party (DTP), comprising Demirel loyalists who had left the TPP, including former Defense Minister Ismet Sezgin, who is close to the military establishment, helped to bolster the dissidents. In fact, they were sufficiently emboldened to look beyond a delay in elections to the defeat of the government and even the to formation of another government under their control.

However, the dissidents' drive was fatally undermined just before the crucial vote by a strong statement by Chief of Staff Huseyin Kivrikoglu. General Kivrikoglu said that despite his earlier reservations, relating in particular to the failure to legislate electoral reform (including the adoption of a two round-system designed to prevent an Islamist electoral victory), he wanted the elections to go ahead "to prevent chaos." His comments were clearly provoked by the compromise in the GNA between the disaffected MPs and the VP relating to the removal of Clause 312 in the Turkish penal code prohibiting activities against the secular order parallel to the effort to delay the elections. Against the advice of its leader, Recai Kutan, the VP, previously a vociferous proponent of elections, had followed the former leader of VP's banned predecessor, the Welfare Party (WP), Necmettin Erbakan, in joining the doomed parliamentary effort. Erbakan, who is banned from politics and faces a trial with possible capital punishment under 312, genuinely seems to have believed that there was a real opportunity for a triumphal return to the political stage. After Kivrikoglu's statement, however, Demirel quickly followed suit with his own comments against a delay, and as the powerful Turkish media harangued the dissidents on a daily basis and sapped their morale, the defeat of the delay motion became a mere formality.

THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE

As its not-so-discreet role in the failure of the effort to delay the elections demonstrated, the military establishment, which was successful in bringing the WP-led coalition with the TPP to an end in June 1997, remains ever-vigilant against the possibility of the Islamists returning to power in any form. Consequently, the dominant theme in the elections is the desire of the powerful Turkish armed forces for the emergence of a cooperative government prepared to hold the secular line enunciated in the crucial National Security Council meeting of February 28, 1997. Predictably, there were strong rumors that just before the elections the VP, like its three predecessors, would actually be banned. Even though this has not happened, with the popular Islamist mayor of Istanbul in jail and Erbakan and other Islamist leaders facing trial, the VP faces a monumental task in persuading likely supporters that their vote would not be wasted as the VP would not be allowed into government under any circumstances. There is also some evidence to suggest that the VP's involvement with the dissidents might have damaged its efforts to portray itself as a credible party which had broken with the incessant tactical maneuvering of Erbakan's WP. Nevertheless, with the strongest party organization throughout the country and the most effective grass roots operation, the VP will surely attract a vote close to the 21.38% the WP received in the last elections as the leading party. However, it is also certain to be challenged strongly for first place by the DLP.

ECEVIT'S MOMENT?

The DLP has been riding the waves of good fortune. It served as a junior partner in the Yilmaz-led coalition, which ruled Turkey for 17 months until November 1998, and has been in minority government during the crucial pre-election period. The capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Kenya and his return to Turkey for trial has enhanced Ecevit's nationalist credentials. Having launched the popular military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, Ecevit is now perceived as the leader overseeing the final defeat of PKK terrorism, which has cost Turkey over 30,000 lives in the past 15 years. At the same time, Ecevit is likely to reap electoral benefits from his image as an honest and incorruptible leader. The periods in office of the MP and the TPP during the past decade were marked by widespread allegations of corruption and abuse of power; and although Ecevit was a member of the last government, which was brought down on corruption, he has managed to escape blame and is in fact benefiting from the general revulsion. Ecevit has also taken credit for the fall in the annual inflation rate to below 50% as well as the fall in interest rates and, as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for the Economy Hikmet Ulugbay made clear at CSIS during a recent visit to Washington, the DSP is looking beyond the elections to overseeing the conclusion of a long-expected agreement with the IMF. Attracting larger crowds than all the other party leaders and assured of the support of the Turkish media, Ecevit may indeed be the man of the hour.

THE END OF THE YILMAZ AND CILLER SHOW?

Ecevit has not hidden his desire for a resumption of the coalition with the MP after the election, with the DSP as the dominant partner. His desire for cooperation is shared by Yilmaz, who is torn between his hope to maintain the cordial working relationship with Ecevit and his need to strive to ensure that the MP will also be given credit for the success in the fight against PKK as well as the reduction in the inflation rate. If a DLP-MP coalition government were to be formed, Yilmaz is likely to want the foreign ministry, which ironically may lead to Turkey being less cooperative with the United States than with Ecevit's Foreign Minister, Ismail Cem, in that post. Yilmaz is a lackluster campaigner, however, and has a well-deserved reputation for electoral failure because of his performances in the 1991 and 1995 elections. He appears to be failing to make any headway and seems unlikely to match the 19.65% the MP collected in the last elections. While the MP electoral campaign is aimed at what Yilmaz calls "the silent majority," growing uncertainty over the MP message has further eroded the Ozal legacy and it is doubtful whether sufficient voters will be galvanized to raise their voices in support of Yilmaz to prevent a mini debacle. Although Yilmaz's control of his party is absolute, it is entirely possible that a third failure at the polls would finally open the way to his ouster.

In 1991 the MP and the TPP received more than half the votes cast. Their collective vote had fallen to 38% in 1995 and it looks as if it is likely to fall again. However, even as they make outrageous claims about the reversal of their parties' political fortunes, Yilmaz and Ciller continue to index their political futures to each other. After initial hesitation, Yilmaz accepted Ciller's challenge that whoever received fewer votes than the other should resign. Although Turkish politics is littered with the broken promises of party leaders, the magnitude of their likely failure could undermine one or both of these politicians and open the way to long-debated consolidation on the center-right.

For its part, the TPP, which received 19.18% of the vote in 1995, also looks unlikely to obtain the same percentage of votes this time. After having based her entire campaign in 1995 against the Islamists, Ciller had then reversed herself spectacularly by participating in the coalition with the WP in 1996-97 and consequently has a serious credibility problem to overcome. Bedeviled by allegations about its leader's corruption and her often-testy relationship with the military, the TPP is campaigning to attract voters who had previously supported the WP but may now be shying away from the VP because of its problem with the army. Although Ciller is a much better campaigner than her rival, Yilmaz, it is improbable that this strategy will yield sufficient votes to compensate for the loss of traditional TPP voters during Ciller's leadership.

HOVERING ON THE BRINK: THE RPP AND THE NAP

A much-discussed question in the current campaign is the likely performance of the Republican People's Party (RPP). After receiving 10.71% of the votes and thus barely surpassing the minimum national vote required for representation in the GNA in 1995, the RPP has been confronting widespread skepticism about its ability to repeat the performance. Having supported the previous government from outside, RPP leader Deniz Baykal then was instrumental in bringing it down, only to see to his chagrin his bitter rival on the center-left, Ecevit, in sole charge of the government. After openly fighting against the widespread corruption at all levels of the Turkish establishment, Baykal has failed to convince the two manipulators of Turkey, the mainstream media and the business community, that he had a well-thought out plan for reform. Nevertheless, while trying to redefine his concept of the "new-left" in Turkey, Baykal seems hopeful that the RPP will be able to collect the traditional social democratic votes as Ecevit moves to the right. He is also hoping to attract the disaffected voters who are increasingly suffering as income distribution becomes even more skewed, but balk at voting for the VP. Still, opinion polls suggest that the RPP will find it difficult to ensure representation unless it is able to draw a sizeable number of the millions of first-time voters.

In contrast, there is growing consensus that the far-right Nationalist Action Party (NAP), which failed to gain any seats last time with 8.18% of the vote, will return to the GNA. Although the founder and legendary leader of the NAP, Alpaslan Turkes, has passed away, prompting an unseemly contest for leadership, the new NAP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, has managed to bring much-needed discipline to a fractious party. The problem for the NAP is that while the country has moved to the right, the Greater Unity Party (GUP), which broke away from the NAP before the 1995 elections, and the MP and the TPP, both of which have former nationalist activists in their leading ranks, are all angling for the nationalist vote. With Ecevit's unique brand of nationalism also attracting some of the traditional NAP voters, the NAP is unlikely to make an electoral breakthrough but will probably leap over the 10% barrier.

In addition to the six parties in realistic competition for seats in the GNA, more than a dozen other, smaller parties are competing in the elections. While none of these parties is likely to gain representation in the GNA, the performance of one will be watched closely. Although the mostly Kurdish People's Democratic Party (PDP) will be permitted to contest the elections despite the efforts of the public prosecutor to close it down, it is unlikely to substantially increase the 4.17% it received in the 1995 elections. Its participation will draw votes away from the VP in the Southeast, but the current electoral system will also probably ensure that the redirection of the PDP votes will favor the VP candidates.

NEW MILLENNIUM-OLD FACES

While anything can happen in the turbulent Turkish political world, it seems that there will be a two or three-party coalition government headed by Ecevit after the elections. It is truly ironic that a Turkey with half its population under 35 will enter the new millennium with two septuagenarians, Ecevit and Demirel, at the helm.

One of the main tasks for the new parliament, though, will be to choose a new president to replace Demirel in May 2000, and the former chief of staff, Ismail Hakki Karadayi, is a leading undeclared candidate. With his appetite for politics.

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