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The New Government Approved

Contrary to expectations immediately after the April 18 elections that the formation of a new government would be relatively quick and straightforward, the process proved to be as complicated and as difficult as our [previous update](#) had predicted.

In fact, while President Suleyman Demirel asked Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, the leader of the Democratic Left Party (DLP), to form the new government on May 3, Ecevit could not reach a coalition agreement until the end of the month. On May 29, Ecevit announced his three-party coalition formula with Devlet Bahceli, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (NAP), and Mesut Yilmaz, the leader of the Motherland Party (MP). The new government's program was duly read in the Grand National Assembly (GNA) on June 4 and approved by the GNA on June 9 by a vote of 354 to 182.

The government comes in with a strong majority and a widespread feeling in the country that it should be long lasting and successful. The delay, however, and the intense political maneuvering during the intervening period are a clear indication that the ideologically difficult political marriage between Ecevit and Bahceli may well end long before the expiration of the five-year parliamentary term. It is worth noting that this is the eighth Turkish government taking office in the past eight years.

A PREDICTABLE DELAY

Soon after April 18 it became an open secret that Ecevit had serious reservations about a coalition with the NAP because of the history of ultranationalist violence associated with the party. However, it was not until Rahsan Ecevit, the prime minister's wife and main political partner, gave public voice to those reservations that people realized just how reluctant Ecevit was. On May 15, in a remarkably candid interview with a Turkish newspaper, Mrs. Ecevit referred to the ultra-nationalists as "people who had taken it upon themselves to defend the Turkish state" by "setting up organizations and parties, organizing the youth and even giving them guns." She said that they "had killed many people for many years. . . had befriended people who had used violence for material gain and had even merged with organized crime and gangs." She said that while a coalition between the DLP and the NAP might be "politically necessary," she and others had "grave reservations" and the only way to get rid of them was to bring them out into the open.

The reaction from the NAP was immediate and predictably negative. Bahceli canceled a planned meeting with Ecevit and suspended the secret contacts on coalition formation with Ecevit's most trusted deputy, Husamettin Ozkan, (the contacts had actually progressed to a draft document of understanding). Taking note of the anger of the NAP rank and file, Bahceli demanded a formal apology before the resumption of negotiations. Ecevit, however, refused to disown the remarks of his wife and, instead of offering an

apology, restricted himself to a statement that her comments related to an earlier era that was hopefully left behind.

The NAP was understandably reluctant to accept this explanation, and the party leadership encouraged speculation that the NAP could form a government without the DLP. While it continued to rule out a deal with the Islamist Virtue Party (VP), the NAP claimed that the MP and Tansu Ciller's True Path Party (TPP) would be willing to join it in government. The prospect of a government without the DLP, which had the twin valuable assets of being the biggest party in the GNA as well as the strongest defender of Turkish secularism, worried the Turkish political and military establishment. President Demirel intervened personally and advised Bahçeli that it was imperative that he move beyond recriminations and strike a deal with the DLP. Mesut Yılmaz, who was predictably eager to don the cloak of participation in government to ward off attacks on him within the MP after his electoral failure but unenthusiastic about joining a coalition with Ciller, also tried his hand at mediation. With the powerful mainstream media that had begun to lobby for a DLP-NAP partnership "for the sake of stability" immediately after the elections also joining the effort, Bahçeli eventually relented. A conciliatory meeting between Ecevit and Bahçeli took place on May 21, ushering in a period of intense consultations between the DLP, NAP, and MP leading ultimately to the formation of the government.

THE DLP IN CHARGE

Ecevit had preferred to form a coalition government with the two center-right parties, but as the TPP failed yet again to oust its leader Tansu Ciller for her electoral disaster, there was no alternative to this particular coalition. Ecevit was under immense pressure to quickly produce a coalition government with a majority in the GNA that would be able to deal with the urgent economic and foreign policy problems. Nevertheless, Ecevit waited in vain for as long as possible for Ciller's opponents in the TPP to go beyond criticism to action, while ignoring appeals from Ciller herself to engage in coalition talks. It is entirely possible, however, that if there are problems between the two main coalition partners in the coming months and the TPP leadership changes, Ecevit might again look to this alternative instead of — or as a prelude to — early elections.

The most important goal for the DLP after April 18 was to retain control of the coalition formation process to eliminate the danger of a right-wing coalition. While the latter was numerically possible, the DLP had the trump card of the discreet but effective support of President Demirel and, even more importantly, the armed forces, which see the DLP as the most effective guardian of the Turkish secular system in a GNA dominated by right-wing parties with varying degrees of adherence to secular principles. The second related DLP goal was to retain control of the stewardship of the economy, education, and foreign affairs in government. With DLP ministers in each of these posts in the new cabinet, the DLP believes with some justification that it is in a position to control government policy in crucial domestic issues as well as in foreign affairs. The government program that was approved in the GNA certainly reflects the DLP's dominance in all aspects of policy, as for example in the declared position on the symbolically important headscarf issue.

Although at the outset of the previous DLP-led minority government in January there had been concern that Ecevit's nationalist worldview could hurt Turkish relations with the United States, the fears proved unjustified. With a prompt invitation to Washington from President Clinton immediately after the vote of confidence, the United States is looking to cooperate even more closely with Ecevit as he moderates the greater nationalist zeal of the NAP in foreign affairs.

THE NAP FORCED TO COMPROMISE

As far as the cabinet composition is concerned, the decisive factor was the close DLP-MP cooperation that had been forged during their previous coalition (July 1996-November 1998). The DLP successfully resisted the 13-13-8 formula proposed by the NAP in favor of a 12-12-10 split, which favored the MP as the junior

member of the coalition. The DLP also turned down Bahçeli's suggestion that the cabinet not include a second deputy prime minister from the MP in addition to himself. In fact, the collusion between the DLP and MP was such that the NAP negotiators designated to finalize the coalition accord complained bitterly that they were being presented with faits accomplis agreed to by the other two parties to the point of denying the NAP its rightful share.

It is clear in retrospect that the NAP was committed to following up its stunning election performance with participation in government. Its relatively weak bargaining position is reflected in its ministerial portfolios. The NAP failed to get control of education, which the DLP insisted on, and also was unable, for example, to get the energy and interior ministry portfolios, which ended up with the MP.

The NAP now finds itself unexpectedly in a government confronted with dangers and opportunities. It is certainly in a position to use its new role to consolidate its position as the leading party on the right. It hopes to wean supporters away from the MP, now reduced from a leader in the last coalition to the ignominious role of junior partner, as well as from the TPP, which is stranded in the political wilderness of opposition with the VP. The constant compromises, however, which are inevitable for the NAP in government, along with association with corruption — all too likely in view of past experience with the MP — might work to the detriment of the NAP with its proudly proclaimed "clean image." Significantly, Bahçeli has made an effort to ensure that his party will not, as it promised in the elections, get involved with any corrupt practices. The headscarf issue on which it gave way to the DLP in the government program will also leave it open to constant criticism by the VP.

MP AS JUNIOR PARTNER

As soon as the election results were in, it was obvious that Yılmaz was desperate to get back into government in one form or another. With the support of the DLP, the MP has certainly managed to obtain representation in government that is, in quality as well as quantity, far in excess of its electoral performance. What is less clear is whether this will save Yılmaz's job as leader or keep the MP from a further electoral slide. Yılmaz, who has decided not to serve in the government until he has cleared corruption allegations against him in the GNA, is hopeful that the likely ouster of his great rival Ciller will lead to a merger between the MP and the TPP under his leadership. With his electoral unpopularity reconfirmed by the recent elections, however, Yılmaz hardly fits the bill as the politician who would lead the recovery and resurgence of the center-right.

THE OPPOSITION IN DISARRAY

As none of the other four parties represented in the GNA was even willing to consider the VP as a coalition partner, the Islamist party was resigned from the outset to confinement to opposition. In fact, the VP is a mere shadow of its predecessor, the Welfare Party (WP), which was the biggest party in the previous GNA. It is dispirited, riven by recriminations over its electoral performance and a barely disguised feud between the current leader, Recai Kutan, and the leader of the disbanded WP, Necmettin Erbakan, who is banned from politics, on the correct future course for the Islamist party. More ominously, it faces further action by the state prosecutor, who has formally moved to close down the VP. Given the VP's problems and weakness, it is hardly surprising that the female VP member of the GNA, Merve Kavakci, who refused to remove her headscarf during the swearing-in at the opening of the GNA and who has subsequently been stripped of her Turkish citizenship, did not make another effort to force the issue.

Unlike the VP, the TPP was hopeful that it could return to government, particularly during the delay caused by Mrs. Ecevit's remarks. Now that she is in opposition, it seems likely that Ciller will have a very difficult task in holding off her angry opponents in the TPP. Although it is not clear whether her newly-emboldened challengers will be more successful this time than before, what is certain is that until there is a resolution of the issue, the TPP effort in opposition will be desultory at best.

STRONG MAJORITY — INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES

The GNA vote of approval for the new government was the biggest since 1991 and reflected the strong numerical superiority of the three-party coalition. Ecevit and Bahçeli have firm control of their respective parties and will be able to control the inevitable dissent in the ranks to a considerable extent, as they showed during the dispute prior to the formation of the government. In addition, the two leaders are extremely courteous individuals who will endeavor to eradicate differences as they arise. Moreover, Ecevit and Yılmaz have the closest possible relationship based on their earlier partnership. Nevertheless, the problems for the new government are more likely to come from within rather than from challenges mounted by the weak and dispirited opposition in the GNA.

This government will certainly have a difficult time, not least because of the presidential elections, which are due in May 2000. The economy is in shambles and, in the absence of an agreement with the IMF, Turkey's chances of attracting foreign capital and investments are slim. Even if the current Islamist party is closed down, difficulties with political Islam will continue. Turkey's continued exclusion from the European Union expansion or evolving defense initiatives will further fuel nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies. The trial and likely capital punishment of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan will strain Turkey's relations with the Western community even more. There will also be continuing uncertainty over Turkey's efforts to play a key role in the transportation of Caspian Sea region oil and gas to markets.

Consequently, the next few months are likely to prove fruitful for political pundits in Ankara as well as elsewhere but perhaps less so for those who have been waiting patiently for a strong and decisive government to tackle Turkey's many pending problems.

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