

CRS Report for Congress

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Turkey: Government Update

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Summary

Capping three years of political instability, a fourth government since the December 1995 election has been formed in Turkey to lead the country to new elections on April 18, 1999. The maneuvering of politicians and the interference of the powerful Turkish military in politics have produced the governmental turnovers. The military continues to be wary of a possible strong showing by Islamists in the coming vote. New Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, an ardent secularist and nationalist, reportedly has little hope of accomplishing much during his very brief tenure. Pending foreign policy issues of concern to Turkey that also concern the United States include Iraq, Cyprus, Greece, and Europe. For additional background and related information, see CRS Reports 97-840F, *Turkey: Situation Update*, September 12, 1997; 97-462F, *Turkey's Unfolding Political Crisis*, April 11, 1997, 97-799F, *Greece and Turkey: Aegean Issues -- Background and Recent Developments*, and CRS Issue Brief 89140, *Cyprus: Status of U.N. Negotiations*, all by (name redacted). This report will not be updated.

Introduction¹

On January 17, 1999, the Turkish parliament approved the fourth coalition government since the December 1995 national election. The government's main task will be to take the country to early national elections, to be held simultaneously with local elections, on April 18, 1999. The government has a truncated domestic program, and will likely continue current foreign policies. Parliament has not passed any political reforms during the past three years. Therefore, the election results may repeat or increase the current divisive party line-up, and political instability is likely to persist. Despite concern that Islamists may make a strong showing, as in 1995, party leaders favor holding the elections as scheduled. Only the powerful military appears uneasy.

¹Information in this report is derived largely from Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) daily reports, Reuters and Associated Press news wires, other English-language press, and the author's interviews with Turkish officials and politicians, including Prime Minister Ecevit, in December 1997.

Background

Turkey has a multiparty political system in which the President is head of state and the Prime Minister is head of government. In line with the 1982 constitution, the Turkish General Staff (TGS), the military leadership, ensures that the state is governed according to the principles of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Republic in 1923. The military has served as guarantor of secularism with particular vigilance since 1995.

In December 1995, five parties won seats in parliament, but none achieved more than 21% of the vote. The Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party won the largest number of votes and most seats in parliament. Ostensible fear of Refah's agenda and potential threat to secularism led center-right archrivals Mesut Yilmaz of the Motherland Party (ANAP) and Tansu Ciller of the True Path Party (DYP) to form a coalition with Yilmaz as Prime Minister. Their personal animosities, however, scuttled the effort within months. In June 1996, Ciller joined a coalition under the Prime Ministry of Refah leader Necmettin Erbakan, creating the first Islamist-led government of modern Turkey. The military soon charged that Islamism was spreading in religious schools, foundations, the bureaucracy, and even the police and armed forces, and mobilized the media and civil society against the government. The resulting outcry combined with the Refah and DYP leaders' political miscalculations to produce their downfall. The Constitutional Court eventually banned Refah for "undermining the secular regime." ANAP's Yilmaz formed the next government in July 1997, with the Democratic Left Party (DSP) of Bulent Ecevit, the Democratic Turkey Party (DTP), a group of defectors from the DYP, and independents. Despite having three plus parties, the government lacked a majority in parliament and relied for its survival on the Republican People's Party (CHP) led by Deniz Baykal, who chose not to join them.

Although Prime Minister Yilmaz's initial priorities included electoral reforms, parliament did not pass any. Instead, the government emphasized the economy and made some needed advances. It concluded an innovative oversight agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and, in line with this accord, inflation fell in 1998 from an annual rate of 91% to 54.7%. The government held the line on public sector wages, had some privatization successes, and improved tax collections. To pass the tax reform and other legislation, however, Yilmaz had to make a deal in June 1998 with Baykal, wherein Baykal agreed not to oppose legislation and Yilmaz agreed to step down in December 1998 in favor of a transitional, non-partisan government that would lead to early elections in April 1999. (The regular schedule called for an election later in 2000.) In the following months, neither man appeared to be fully committed to his part of the bargain or to trust the other, although tax reform passed. In November 1998, the Prime Minister was accused of corruption for allegedly assisting in the sale of a state-owned bank to a businessman said to have ties to organized crime. Baykal and Ciller exploited the political opportunity presented by the scandal to force Yilmaz's departure under a cloud a few weeks earlier than planned. Yilmaz refused to resign of his own volition, but he lost a censure vote on November 25 and was compelled to do so.

President Suleyman Demirel then turned to Democratic Left Party (DSP) leader Ecevit to form a government. DSP holds only 61 out of 550 seats in parliament, and Ecevit required the cooperation of other political leaders to fulfill his task. As a secularist, Ecevit ruled out bringing Refah's successor, the Fazilet (Virtue) Party (FP), into

government. Yilmaz was willing to work with Ecevit again, but other party leaders were less accommodating. Ciller, seeking to become Prime Minister herself, to thwart Ecevit, and to appeal to FP's constituency, demanded an all-party government, including FP. Baykal, whose CHP holds fewer seats in parliament than DSP, demanded an equal number of ministries for all parties despite their parliamentary strengths. Ecevit was stymied and returned his mandate on December 21. Demirel, perhaps seeking to undermine his nemesis, Ciller, next turned to the openly ambitious independent, Yalim Erez. A key Ciller advisor and Minister of Industry in the Refah-DYP coalition, Erez had bolted the DYP and that government when it came under attack from the military and others. He held the same portfolio in the Yilmaz government as an independent. Erez reportedly was on the verge of forming a government on January 4, 1999, when Ciller, worried about his potential to split her party and resentful of his 1997 defection, proposed that Ecevit lead a DSP minority government which she and Yilmaz would support from the outside. Yilmaz, still vulnerable to possible legal action for corruption should his parliamentary immunity be lifted, went along with his rival's idea. Since it was one of the alternatives he had proposed earlier, Ecevit agreed.

On January 11, Ecevit presented a government formed almost entirely from his party, with only the Interior, Justice, and Transportation Ministries held by independents as constitutionally required of any government in the run-up to elections. Ciller's influence on the government's formation is clear in the choice of one of her former advisors for Justice Minister and in the "promotion" of the Education Minister who had angered Islamists. Observers remark on the fact that she remains a political force despite having earned the lasting antipathy of the military due to her championship of Refah and Fazilet.

Role of the Military

The military has been frustrated by the inaction of the politicians against Islamism. The General Staff's opposition to fundamentalism, called reactionism in Turkey, has been unabated since before the National Security Council² issued a list of recommendations or ultimata to ensure the protection of secularism on February 28, 1997. The governments in power since then have not implemented many of the recommendations other than a law requiring 8 years of public education to prevent Islamic schools from reaching children at impressionable ages and more rigorous, controversial enforcement of a ban on head scarves in public institutions. Some conservative Muslim legislators from parties other than Refah/Fazilet are offended by the proposals. Others are reluctant to alienate conservative Muslim constituencies who may manifest power at the polls.

The composition of the Turkish General Staff changed routinely in August 1998, with the replacement of the Chief of Staff, his deputy, and several commanders, but its anti-Islamist determination has not as evidenced by recent statements. On November 30, 1998, the Office of the Chief of the General Staff rebuked Fazilet Party (FP) leader Recai Kutan for incorrectly characterizing the military's view of the FP as favorable. It also called on political leaders to show cautious sensitivity in negotiations to form a government. At the

²The Turkish National Security Council is comprised of an equal number of civilian and military officials; but the military drives the agenda and civilian dissent from recommendations at meetings is not made public. Its constitutional role is to formulate and implement national security policy, which is defined very broadly in practice.

same time, the National Security Council called for passage of laws to fight reactionism. On January 5, 1999, the Land Forces Commander chided politicians that "the country needs domestic stability more than ever." On January 8, the new Turkish General Staff (TGS) Press Information Office distributed an "information brochure" containing strong opinions on a range of issues from the social and cultural reasons why the TGS need not be subordinate to the Defense Ministry to the poor representation of Turkish views abroad. Significantly, the brochure observed "it is compatible with democracy to ban political entities that want to abolish secularism and destroy democracy." The military academies issued a booklet calling for "a new war of national liberation" against Islamic activism and on parliament to pass legislation to protect the secularist republic.³

It is unclear whether the military's sentiments will be translated into action. In the past, special prosecutors seem to have carried out the military's preferences. Yet, normal legal processes would take months to ban Fazilet, should grounds be found, as they did Refah. The so-called "soft coup" of February 1997 took several months to end the Refah-DYP government, and revealed that the military may be reluctant to intervene as directly as it did in 1960 and 1980. An election dreaded by the military because it might confirm continuing Islamist strength, therefore, will likely occur despite those fears.

Bulent Ecevit⁴

Bulent Ecevit was born in Istanbul in 1925. He graduated from the American Robert College in 1946 and became a journalist. In 1959, he was elected to parliament as a Republican People's Party (CHP) deputy, and became party chairman in 1965. Ecevit served as Prime Minister of a coalition with Islamists in 1974, when he ordered the intervention/invasion of Cyprus, very briefly in 1977, and then in 1978-79. Ecevit was arrested during the 1980 military coup, and was barred from politics until parliament passed a constitutional amendment permitting his participation in 1987. He then took over leadership of the Democratic Left Party (DSP) from his wife, who had founded the party in 1985. Ecevit re-entered parliament as a DSP deputy in 1995.

Ecevit rules his party autocratically. DSP won 75 seats in 1995, but now holds only 61 because of defections. Ecevit reportedly disdains Baykal, ruling out an otherwise logical merger with the DSP's ideological twin, the CHP. (Baykal mirrors Ecevit's views. CHP voted against the DSP government despite sharing many of its beliefs.) Ecevit has a reputation for a modest life-style, and, in a political world rife with corruption, honesty.

The smooth working relationship of Ecevit and Yilmaz during their coalition surprised some observers and highlighted the dominance of personality over policy in Turkish politics as well as Ecevit's essential patriotism. Ecevit and his DSP cohort controlled Turkey's foreign policy, and it reflected his nationalism and assertiveness. Ironically, their policies and ardent secularism are similar to those of the military.

Government Program

³Associated Press wire, January 8, 1999, also Turkish Daily News on line, January 9 and 11, 1998.

⁴Based in part on Curriculum Vitae of Prime Minister Ecevit Outlined, Anatolia, transcription carried by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) on line, January 12, 1999.

Ecevit has acknowledged that his government's main task is to lead the country to the election. He expressed hope to pass a budget, social security reform, and banking reform to signal Turkey's trustworthiness to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international bankers, and possibly secure a financial agreement. Turkey has large debt service payments due in early 1999 and has been harmed by the global financial crisis. However, the government is not expected to accomplish even this modest agenda. A half-year budget is in place and could last through the election, although perhaps not until a new government is formed. Differences among parties over raising retirement ages have not been reconciled, and some have reservations over bank regulation. Moreover, Members of Parliament have had notoriously poor attendance, and already are abandoning Ankara to campaign. Parliament will likely recess in early February.

Significantly, electoral reforms that might have produced a two-stage vote to contain the Islamists and other legislation to guarantee the right of expatriates to vote are not on Ecevit's legislative agenda. The lack of absentee voter rights could lead to challenges to the legitimacy of the election, while an unchanged electoral system may perpetuate the profusion of parties in parliament and gridlock.

Foreign Policy Issues and Implications for the United States

Because DSP controlled foreign policy in the previous government, no surprises are expected. Some officials' intemperate statements may irk the U.S. State Department, as in the past, but they are unlikely to be matched by actions. Although viewed as instinctively suspicious of the United States, Ecevit nonetheless appears to appreciate the United States' superpower status and its recognition of Turkey's strategic importance. The following current issues of concern to Turkey also concern the U.S. Administration or Congress.

Iraq. In his statements, Ecevit fondly recalls the pre-Gulf War period when neighboring Iraq was Turkey's second largest market, and he visited Baghdad several times. He is reported to be distrustful of what he believes to be the intent of the West, including the United States, to dismember Iraq and create a Kurdish state in the north that would serve as a precedent for the division of Turkey, which has been fighting Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) separatists for 15 years. Ecevit has faulted U.S. policy toward Iraq for lacking a vision of a post-Saddam future and called for a U.S.-Turkish dialogue on the subject. He also charged that U.S. planes enforcing the no-fly zone over northern Iraq from Incirlik Air Base in southeast Turkey (Operation Northern Watch) have been firing on Iraqi targets on the "pretext" that they have been targeted themselves. On the other hand, Ecevit has said that it is incumbent on Iraq to "act in greater harmony with the world,"⁵ and observed earlier that Baghdad's failure to cooperate with investigations of its weapons of mass destruction was dangerous.⁶ While critical of the United States, Ecevit probably will not impede Northern Watch, whose mandate the Turkish parliament renews every six months. Interestingly, at the same time that Ecevit was questioning U.S. policy toward Iraq, his government requested and rapidly received U.S. Patriot missiles to shield Turkey from an unlikely Iraqi attack.

⁵Ecevit on Goals, Iraqi Crisis, Incirlik. Interview on NTV, January 12, 1999, translation carried by FBIS online, January 12, 1999.

⁶Reuters, November 4, 1998.

Cyprus. Unofficially, Ecevit says that the Cyprus question was solved by the "peace operation" of 1974. Officially, he supports Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash's call for a confederation of two sovereign states, as opposed to a U.N.-endorsed federation. Ecevit and Denktash announced the partial integration of Turkish Cyprus with Turkey in July 1997 in response to European Union membership talks with the Greek-Cypriot-led Cyprus government. Although a December 1998 U.N. Security Council resolution called for new initiatives to reach a settlement, and President Clinton vowed to take "all necessary steps to support the Security Council resolutions," no new U.N. or U.S. initiatives are expected before the Turkish election. The U.N. and U.S. statements provided an opening for the Greek-Cypriots to cancel plans to deploy Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missiles and avert a missile crisis. Turkey made no concessions in exchange for the cancellation and criticized the U.N. resolutions.

Greece. U.S. NATO allies Turkey and Greece have a history of strained relations, which have worsened since a January 1996 dispute over a rocky islet in the Aegean Sea, and since Greece vetoed European Union (EU) financial aid for Turkey and opposed Turkey's EU membership candidacy. Greece insists that the Cyprus issue be solved and that Turkey agree to take the islet and another Aegean dispute to the International Court of Justice before Athens lifts its veto. Prime Minister Costas Simitis has lost popular support at home due to hardships engendered by his economic program to achieve European Monetary Union membership. A weak Simitis is unlikely to reach out to a weak, short-term government in Ankara that would not reciprocate unless Athens concedes on EU issues. The Ecevit government is unlikely to compromise on Cyprus and has stepped up its rhetorical challenges on the Aegean. This portends a continuing stalemate in bad bilateral relations, and work for U.S. policymakers seeking to better them. While no crisis is anticipated in the near term, the 1996 crisis was unanticipated -- ignited by actions of citizens uncontrolled by the governments in either Athens or Ankara.

Europe. The United States has sought to anchor Muslim Turkey in the West by drawing it closer to the European Union. The achievement of this goal appears to have been blocked temporarily as events have moved Turkey and Europe farther apart, and no improvement is in sight. Turkey has appeared outwardly less caring about Europe since the EU failed to include Turkey on a list of prospective members in December 1997. Turkish officials engaged in vituperative, undiplomatic recriminations against Germany, which they held responsible for the EU rejection, and against Italy for its refusal to extradite and later freeing of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. The Europeans have attempted to overcome strains. For example, the European Commission developed a plan to work around Greece's funding veto and the EU joined U.S. and U.N. efforts to encourage Cyprus not to deploy the Russian missiles. But these acts had little positive effect on Ecevit or on his ministers, who suggested that the EU was merely doing what the situations required. Ecevit's government has dropped what has sometimes been described as a supplicant's demeanor toward Europe.

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