

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Turkey's November 3, 2002 National Election

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### Summary

In Turkey's November 3, 2002 national election, voters vented their frustrations over an impoverishing recession, a painful International Monetary Fund program, and endemic corruption by expelling the governing coalition parties and others. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has Islamist roots, won by occupying the terrain of the majority center-right of Turkish politics. It will form a government without its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been banned because of an Islamist speech. AKP's highest priorities are economic recovery and accession negotiations with the European Union. It might offer the United States a useful model of a Muslim democracy, and its initially pragmatic foreign policy may be in line with U.S. aims regarding Iraq, Cyprus, and the European Union. (See also CRS Report RL31794, *Iraq: Turkey and the Deployment of U.S. Forces*.)

### Background

The April 1999 national election in Turkey brought to power an ideologically mismatched three-party coalition government. While 77-year old Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit of the Democratic Left Party (DSP) was hospitalized in spring 2002, differences worsened between his two coalition partners over reforms needed for European Union (EU) membership. The government was paralyzed. Yet, all three partners resisted calls for an early election because they wanted to stay in office long enough for voters to feel the effects of an economic recovery from the worst recession in 50 years. On June 30, 2002, Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli surprisingly called for an early national election to be held November 3, instead of in April 2004 as scheduled. The move was aimed at ending political intrigues that he suspected were intended to replace him (and Ecevit) in the government. Parliament eventually scheduled elections as Bahçeli had proposed. Ecevit would later characterize the election as an act of political suicide.

### Election Results

The voters' anger over their economic plight produced a political upheaval. Their anger was directed at the three governing parties and at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which had required the government to undertake a painful macroeconomic reform

program in exchange for funds to abate financial crises. Voters threw the coalition partners, who together had polled 54% of the vote in 1999, out of office and out of parliament. None achieved the 10% of the vote required to enter parliament; together they won less than 15% of the vote. About 90% of the members of the old parliament will not serve in the new one. Two opposition parties also were purged. Leaders of several losing parties have resigned their leadership posts and more resignations are anticipated. Some analyses describe the election as the beheading of an entire political class.

For the first time since 1950, only two parties will be in parliament. For the first time since 1987, a single party, not a coalition, will form a government. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has Islamist roots and is led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won 34.28% of the vote and 363 seats out of 550 and will form the government. The Republican People's Party (CHP), the party of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the secular Turkish Republic, won 19.39% of the vote and 178 seats in parliament; it will form the opposition. CHP is led by Denis Baykal. Nine independents will hold seats. About 78% of all eligible voters cast ballots. An unprecedented 46% of the electorate voted for parties which failed to pass the 10% threshold and many may feel disenfranchised by an election outcome that excludes the parties they supported from parliament. This may tarnish the AKP's victory somewhat.

## Election Analysis

The November 3, 2002, election is being referred to as a major political realignment because so many established political parties and leaders were eliminated. The disastrous economy was the primary catalyst for the upheaval, and corruption in the ruling class was a critical contributing factor. The coalition parties were held responsible for precipitating the recession, exacerbating it, and, in some instances, creating obstacles to the economic recovery. Their tenure was marred by an unending parade of scandals involving officials who allegedly used their government positions for personal enrichment with impunity. Voters lacked trust in politicians seen as interested only in themselves and not in the masses whom they had impoverished. The scandals alienated voters largely from center-right parties which had led the country for most of the 1990's and whose leaders were seen as most dishonest.<sup>1</sup> In 1999, Ecevit and Bahceli had brought their respective left- and right-wing parties to power on the strength of their personal honesty. In order for the tripartite government to survive, however, they were tied to discredited members of ANAP and became tainted by the association.

The political realignment of November 3 is one of parties and leaders, not one of public opinion. The Turkish voters remain predominantly center-right, according to analysts, and during the campaign, AKP moved decisively to claim them. AKP cannily eschews the label "Islamist," preferring to be called "conservative democrat" or "Muslim democrat," in imitation of European Christian democratic parties. At least 50% of AKP's voters are more center- right than Islamist in inclination. They are secularist, and

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<sup>1</sup> The two main center right parties are ANAP led by former Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz and the True Path Party (DYP) led by former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller. The decline in popularity of both parties was sharp. ANAP which first rose to power in 1983 with 45.2% of the vote and a majority in parliament; won a bare 5.1% in 2002. Its descent failed to make ANAP govern the ministries it controlled in ways that might expunge its reputation for corruption.

overwhelmingly oppose the imposition of Islamic law and political exploitation of religion, according to public opinion polls. They want religion to remain a matter of personal faith separate from government policy. For example, most would likely oppose making veiling of women mandatory as favored by stricter Islamists, but might favor allowing women to wear head scarves in public buildings, which is now forbidden.<sup>2</sup>

## Forming a Government

AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan (known widely as “Tayyip”) was not allowed to run for parliament and cannot be Prime Minister because of his 1998 conviction for inciting hatred based on religion. He had publicly recited a poem declaring, “Minarets are our bayonets, domes are our helmets, mosques are our barracks, believers are our soldiers.” Observers suggest that his views have since evolved and moderated. If the new parliament amends the Constitution to provide for freer expression and rescinds the ban on Erdogan, he still will not be able to enter parliament and assume leadership of a government until another general election or a by-election results in his being chosen as a Member of Parliament. A constitutional provision stipulating that a by-election not be held until at least 30 months after a general election or 5% of the seats are vacant also would need to be amended, assuming that Erdogan would not want to wait 2½ years to take office or to have 5% of his deputies resign. CHP leader Baykal has said that Erdogan must become Prime Minister, because it is the will of the people. Baykal supports lifting the ban and a by-election if certain conditions are met.<sup>3</sup> Another less likely possibility is amending the Constitution to allow the appointment of a non-member of parliament as Prime Minister, which some oppose because it would tailor the law to a single individual and be a major change in the political system. Amending the Constitution requires 2/3 of the votes in parliament, a requirement that AKP can meet with the support of a few independents. The Constitution requires the President to approve an amendment or refer it to a national referendum if he disapproves.

Erdogan has said that he feels voters chose him to lead because his name as party leader was on a ballot along with the party logo. He believes “that the nation assigned a duty to Tayyip Erdogan when electing the AKP.” Because that duty is being postponed, the AKP has to look for way to organize “along the lines of the wishes of the nation.”<sup>4</sup> Since the election, Erdogan has acted like and been treated by some foreign governments as a national leader. AKP has authorized him to select a candidate for Prime Minister and to name all members of the government.

AKP intends to streamline and cut the cost of government by reducing the number of ministries from 38 to less than 25. The large number of ministries had resulted from coalition governments, in which each partner had to be rewarded. The Court separately

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, Majority of Turks are Moderate Secularists but Support Expanding Religious Freedoms, *Opinion Analysis*, October 25, 2002. These conclusions resulted from interviews conducted in Turkey between August 15-21, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Baykal wants parliamentary immunities lifted (as anti-corruption measure) and national elections to be held every 4 years instead of 5 years. AKP probably would agree to the former, but not the latter.

<sup>4</sup> Erdogan for Strong PM, TRT, November 6, 2002, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereinafter FBIS) document GMP20021106000068.

ruled that Erdogan cannot be a founding member of AKP because of his conviction. He resigned as a founder on October 20, but remained party chairman and continued to campaign for the party. On October 23, the chief prosecutor filed suit demanding the closure of the AKP because of what he considered an illegal subterfuge. Since the Court did not rule before the election, AKP's victory in the election may restrain the judiciary for a while, but the threat of a ban shadows the ruling party.

## Justice and Development Party's Views

AKP learned the lessons of its four Islamist precursors banned since 1971. In particular, it has tried not to repeat the mistakes of the Refah or Welfare Party, which was forced from power in 1997 after barely a year in office because the military and secular establishment deemed its conduct incompatible with the secular identity of the state. AKP leaders have tried to appear moderate to reassure domestic and foreign audiences. AKP's female candidates for parliament did not wear head scarves, indicating that the party wanted to avoid confrontation, although it still believes that the prohibition on wearing head scarves in public buildings should be eliminated because it is antithetical to democracy. On election night, Erdogan declared, "We are the guarantors of secularism."<sup>5</sup> He said that AKP did not seek to change the Constitution's mandate that the state be secular. AKP pledged to meet the targets of the IMF program, noting that agreements signed by one government bind its successor.

None of the AKP's stated views differ from Turkey's established foreign policies. The party vowed to comply with all criteria for European Union membership. (See below.) On other critical issues, such as Iraq and Cyprus, the party stated that policy would be devised after consultations with the Foreign Ministry, the military, and relevant agencies. Erdogan said that the government would follow U.N. determinations concerning Iraq. Erdogan even told Israel radio "Israeli-Turkish relations in the military, defense, and economic areas will not be hurt.... The relationship between us will remain good because it is a very strong interest of the two countries, backed by the United States."<sup>6</sup>

## Challenges of Governing

The government's foremost domestic challenge is to continue the recovery from the recession and position the country on a stronger economic footing. The government could benefit from the fruits of programs already underway if growth trickles down to the masses. The annual gross domestic product growth rate this year is likely to reach at least 4% to 5%. The annual rate of inflation is already down to 33%, besting the year-end 35% annual target for 2002 set by the standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund. AKP will have to reassure the international financial institutions and investors of its commitment to the macroeconomic reforms. AKP officials have created some unease with plans to revisit the structure of regulatory boards for banking, energy, and telecommunications, generating fears of repoliticization. Awaiting action as part of the reform program are streamlining of government by cutting 12,000 public sector jobs,

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Fisher, Voters in Turkey Expel Leadership, *The New York Times*, November 4, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Rachman, Party with Islamic Roots Wins Turkish Elections, AP, November 4, 2002.

privatization of state economic enterprises, including the monopolies on tobacco and alcohol, tax reforms, and inflation targeting.

Turkey promised the IMF that it would maintain a primary budget surplus of 6.5% to deal with the huge national debt, leaving little leeway for new AKP programs. Some AKP officials had questioned the size of the promised surplus, but since the election they have indicated that it will be retained. Erdogan said that his highest domestic priority is employment, followed by transportation, housing, and improving fundamental rights and freedoms. Erdogan said that massive infrastructure construction projects, involving the building of 15,000 miles of highways and 1.5 million housing units, are a priority and an engine of growth and employment. He also announced \$1.2 billion in credits for small businessmen hit hard by the 2001 financial crisis, a gesture toward one of AKP's main constituencies who are a potential source of new growth. A drop in interest rates that would produce lower debt payments is supposed to produce funds for these undertakings.

The former government had demanded that the European Union summit meeting in Copenhagen on December 10-12 set a date for accession negotiations to begin. AKP accepts this goal as its priority, although Erdogan declared that the process would not end if a date is not specified. This is a pragmatic change in rhetoric from the nationalist Ecevit-led government. Erdogan already has met EU ambassadors in Ankara and begun to visit European capitals. He announced a nine-point plan to address shortcomings in meeting EU's Copenhagen criteria for membership that had been identified in an October 2002 European Commission progress report. The plan includes review of the Constitution through the prism of Turkey's national program and the European Convention of Human Rights; enhancing freedoms of expression, religion, conscience, and association; reform of political parties and elections laws; implementation of decisions of the European Court of Human Rights; zero-tolerance measures regarding torture; easing restrictions on foreign associations in Turkey and on minority religious foundations.<sup>7</sup> Erdogan understands that a solution to the division of Cyprus would improve Turkey's EU prospects and assist relations between Turkey and Greece.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding Iraq, AKP officials have repeated the established view that Turkey prefers a peaceful solution and that a war would do great harm to their country.<sup>9</sup> They also noted that they do not want weapons of mass destruction in their neighborhood and expressed support for the U.N. resolution demanding that Iraq disarm.

Analysts are concerned that while some members have had experience in AKP-run local governments and others in the brief Refah Party-led government of 1996-1997, many MP's and the party itself are untested in governance. It remains uncertain, in their view, whether AKP will be up to its challenges.

AKP policies and conduct will determine whether it can mollify skeptics in the military and secular elite who believe that the party has a hard-core of religious fundamentalists engaged in *taqiyyah*, i.e., dissembling for the good of the faith and in this

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<sup>7</sup> Nine-Point Plan Outlined, AP, November 13, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See also, CRS Issue Brief IB89140: *Cyprus: Status of U.N. Negotiations*, updated regularly.

<sup>9</sup> See also, CRS Report RS21336, *Iraq: The Turkish Factor*, updated October 31, 2002.

case hiding a secret Islamist agenda. The military, which is the powerful, constitutionally-authorized guarantor of the secular state, has been critical of Islamist parties in the past and undoubtedly will remain vigilant. Erdogan has averred, “The AKP cannot have even the smallest problem with the army.”<sup>10</sup> General Hilmi Ozkok, chief of the general staff, said that the election reflected the will of the nation. “I only have respect for the results.”<sup>11</sup> Days later, on the anniversary of the death of Ataturk, the Republic’s founder, Ozkok issued a cautionary statement reaffirming the will of the armed forces to protect the republic from all threats, starting with reactionism (as fundamentalism is called in Turkey).<sup>12</sup> It remains to be seen how AKP will please its hard-core and not cross the military.

## Implications for the United States

The United States has long described Turkey as a model of a Muslim country that is also a democracy. Turkey’s secularism may have helped to make it a successful model, but not one that non-secular Muslim states could imitate. Before the Turkish election, Administration officials avoided giving the “Islamist” AKP a U.S. imprimatur. The U.S. Ambassador in Turkey avoided AKP leaders and Erdogan failed to get an appointment at the State Department during a January 2002 visit to Washington. Now, some argue, the AKP victory may offer the opportunity for the United States to back a Muslim democracy whose model might be transferable elsewhere. In any event, before the election, the State Department spokesman declared, regarding AKP, “we oppose the banning of political parties that are expressing their views in a peaceful and democratic manner.”<sup>13</sup> The Administration has since saluted the election as evidence of Turkey’s vibrant democracy.<sup>14</sup>

The United States has sought a more stable and competent government in Ankara, one that would not reel from coalition to coalition or from crisis to crisis. The majority AKP government has the potential to provide stability. After meeting Erdogan on November 7, U.S. Ambassador Robert Pearson declared that the themes of the election campaign, that is the EU accession date, economic prosperity, democratic reforms, government effectiveness, and anti-corruption “are exactly those themes which the United States supports.”<sup>15</sup> For his part, Erdogan has referred to the United States as Turkey’s “natural ally.” AKP’s pragmatic approach to foreign policy regarding Iraq, Cyprus, and the European Union may be easier for the U.S. Administration to work with than the more rigidly nationalism of former Prime Minister Ecevit’s government.

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<sup>10</sup> Erdogan Explains AKP’s Priority Issues, Relations with Army, CNN Turk, November 4, 2002, FBIS document GMP20021105000070.

<sup>11</sup> General Ozkok says Elections Reflect Will of Nation, NTV, November 5, 2002, FBIS document GMP20021105000034.

<sup>12</sup> Gen. Ozkok says TSK will Continue to Fight Reactionaryism, *Milliyet*, November 9, 2002, FBIS document GMP20021109000034.

<sup>13</sup> State Department daily briefing, October 31, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> State Department daily briefing, November 4, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Amb. Pearson, Erdogan Hold News Conference, FBIS Report, November 7, 2002, FBIS document GMP20021107000146.

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