

# Sharp rightward shift in the Turkish elections

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The most-used word to describe the recent general elections in Turkey was "earthquake". And that is indeed what happened last Sunday. The deep social divisions within Turkish society thundered through its political system, tearing the ground from beneath all those remaining liberals, at home and abroad, who had hoped for some form of social compromise, national reconciliation and democratic reforms.

The greatest surprise was not the clear victory of the social democrats under Bulent Ecevit's "Democratic Left Party" (DSP). Nor was it the losses of the centre-right parties, such as Mesut Yilmaz' "Motherland Party" (ANAP), or Tansu Ciller's "True Path Party" (DYP). Ecevit won 22 percent of the votes cast, an increase of around 9 points since the last elections. Yilmaz and Ciller both lost around 6 percent. It was also no surprise that the pro-Kurdish "Democratic Peoples Party" (HADEP) did not pass the 10 percent hurdle required to gain parliamentary representation, although they enjoyed broad support in the mainly Kurdish areas of southeast Turkey and won control of several city halls.

What was astonishing were the clear losses for the Islamist "Virtue Party" (FP). The landslide successes of the fascist "Nationalist Movement Party" (MHP), better known as the "Grey Wolves", also unleashed a real shock. The MHP was not only able to re-enter parliament, but with 18 percent they doubled their 1995 result and became the second largest party. They will play a key role in the future politics of Turkey.

The only established party with even a glimmer of a claim to be "left-wing", the social democratic "Republican Peoples Party" (CHP) of Deniz Baykals, is no longer represented in parliament. The CHP considers itself to be the direct successors to the party of Kemal Attaturk, the founder of modern Turkey, which ruled from 1923 to 1950. One of Baykals' election slogans was, "Don't keep the party of Attaturk out of parliament" (*Turkish Daily News*, 20 April 1999).

The CHP was thoroughly disgraced between 1991 and 1995, during its participation in the coalition government. Not only was the war against the Kurds escalated in the southeast, in the west the police were used with increasing brutality against strikes and demonstrations, including those CHP members who took part. In the last four years spent in opposition, the CHP was known less for its occasionally critical remarks and more for its parliamentary wheeling and dealing behind closed doors.

ANAP and DYP received about 13 percent of the vote.

Although they remain in parliament they have received their rewards for more than a decade of corruption, nepotism and involvement with the mafia. The *Stuttgarter Zeitung* of April 20 wrote, "The political centre-right of Mesut Yilmaz and Tansu Ciller has been punished for a series of scandals. How great their fall is can be seen by looking back at 1987. Then, the ANAP and DYP together won 56.4 percent. Today it is barely 25."

The Islamists lost votes mainly as a result of the massive campaign of intimidation by the military. In 1997, the army forced the resignation of the Islamist Prime Minister, Erbakan, who still acts as the Islamists *eminence grise*. His "Welfare Party" (RP--the predecessor to the Virtue Party [FP]) was banned shortly thereafter. Since then, there has been no let-up in the campaign against Islamism. The army made clear that it would not tolerate a take-over by the FP. For their part, the Virtue Party has constantly sworn its loyalty to the state and the official policy of secularism. In the future, a hard-line Islamic wing could well arise.

It is the fascists who mainly benefited from the losses of the FP, ANAP and DYP. In 1991, in an alliance with the RP, they were able to enter parliament but have never been in government and failed to win enough votes in 1995 to be represented. One of their demagogic election slogans was "Fight poverty and corruption"--this from the same Grey Wolves who, along with attacking the Kurds, liked nothing more than threatening protesting workers, and who, moreover, support the International Monetary Fund.

In the election campaign they toned down their propaganda, and put on sheep's clothing. The fact that this was merely a tactic was quickly revealed by the veteran MHP functionary--and for the last two years leader of the wolf pack--Devlet Bahceli, who bluntly told the *Sabah* newspaper, "We have never changed our line since the 1970s, but we are less aggressive today" (Quoted in *taz*, 20 April 1999).

During the class battles of the 1970s, the Grey Wolves acted in the fashion of Hitler's brownshirts, under the benevolent eye of the police, murdering left-wing workers, student activists and those from religious minorities. Among their many victims were numerous supporters of Ecevit. For his part, Ecevit avoided rousing the working class to take on the fascist terror, and in 1980 left it to the military to ensure "peace and order".

Ecevit, who avoided making any attacks on the MHP during

the elections, declared that the outcome of the poll has "proved the strength of the democratic and secular system". He did not exclude forming a coalition with the Grey Wolves. Both "the world and Turkey" have overcome the "ideological divisions of the past", he said. When Alparslan Turkes, the founding leader of the MHP, was buried two years ago, Ecevit said that as well as "a few differences" between them, there were also "a great many things in common: the love of the people, of Kemalism and secularism" (Quoted in Fikret Aslan's *Graue Woelfe heulen wieder* [ *The Grey Wolves howl again*]). It is not the Grey Wolves who have "overcome" their fascist character, but Ecevit who has abandoned any last political or moral inhibitions, if he ever had any.

Nevertheless, it is not certain that a DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition could be formed, as is favoured by some Turkish newspapers. The Turkish stock exchange reacted to the fascists' gains by recording heavy losses. Abroad, the reaction ranges from apprehension to consternation, especially in Europe. President Demirel will certainly be engaging in many long discussions behind closed doors with the party chiefs, military leaders and especially the American administration, before he appoints a new government.

It is likely that the NATO countries will initially warn against taking the MHP into government. Since the US and its NATO allies have recently launched a war in Yugoslavia, which they have proclaimed as a "fight against fascism", it would be somewhat embarrassing if, in one of NATO's member states, the fascists were to be part of the government.

But Europe and the United States stand at the edge of the precipice which they have created. What are the reasons for this election result in Turkey? Both the Turkish and international press agreed that there were two main reasons why social discontent could be directed down such right-wing channels.

First is raging Turkish chauvinism. This began last year following the expulsion of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), from Syria and then grew into an atmosphere of lynch-justice and pogrom after he was abducted back to Turkey. The MHP marked its greatest success amongst the farmers and petty-bourgeois layers in the provinces of Anatolia. It is from amongst their ranks that most of the soldiers come who have been whipped into a frenzy in the fight against the PKK. The towns in the west, on the other hand, tended more strongly to support Ecevit.

Many times, the MHP fomented up a nationalist mob at "patriotic" meetings and protests it organised, encouraged by the government and the media. Both Greece and Syria had finally given way, under the threat of war from Turkey, and had allowed Ocalan to meet his fate at the hands of the Turkish government. Inside Turkey these actions were interpreted, not incorrectly, as a licence to unleash terror and chauvinism against the Kurds.

The NATO attack on Serbia gave the fascists additional encouragement. From the start, Ecevit announced his solidarity

with his "Muslim brothers" in Kosovo and offered to send Turkish troops. The media went wild with war propaganda. Of course, the MHP displayed no reticence. The *SÄddeutsche Zeitung* noted on April 20, "Turkey is bidding farewell to Europe, and it could not have chosen a worse time to do so. While Yugoslavia burns, the Balkans are tottering and Europe is groaning under the burden of responsibility for the war, loud-mouthed nationalists in Ankara are grasping for power, declaring 'nobody needs give them any lessons'. They dream of a strong state and of a fantastical empire called Turan, stretching from the Adriatic to the Gates of Peking. 'Kosovo, Kosovo--do you hear our steps?' the ultra-nationalists chant as they celebrate their election victory on the streets of Istanbul. This was the first taste of what is to come."

Whether the Grey Wolves are quickly ensconced in government ministries or whether they drive the government forward from the opposition benches remains an open question. It largely depends on the actions of ANAP and the DYP. What is certain is that the political climate is changing for the long-term. The election result makes almost certain that Ocalan will receive the death penalty, and that it will be carried out. The Kurdish conflict, which has been growing for weeks as a result of state repression and a series of attacks, will escalate even further.

Following these elections both Turkey and the world face even less peaceful times. Much of the responsibility for this lies with those now expressing their "concern", but who have washed their hands of any responsibility: the US, the European Union, NATO and the IMF. They have created the ground of social depravation wherein the right-wing demagogues sow their seeds. Their manipulation of national conflicts is helping them to blossom.



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