

Ahmet Sezer chosen new president of Turkey

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On May 5 the Turkish parliament elected the chairman of the constitutional court, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, as the new president of Turkey. Sezer received 330 of the 550 votes cast. He is due to take over from the current officeholder, Süleiman Demirel, on May 16.

The government headed by Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the social democratic Democratic Left Party (DLP) had attempted, unsuccessfully, to gain a second presidential term for Demirel with the help of a constitutional amendment. Ecevit then declared that Sezer's election was necessary to maintain political stability and take forward discussions with the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

Following vigorous debate over possible candidates, leaders of the various factions in parliament surprisingly agreed two weeks ago on the colourless judge, who is not a member of any party. Sezer was finally voted through in the third round.

His final vote tally was still well under the two-thirds majority prescribed for the first two rounds of voting, despite the withdrawal after the second round of his two most prominent rivals—parliamentary speaker Yildirim Akbulut of the conservative Motherlands Party (ANAP) and the former general head of staff, Dogan Güres.

After Sezer, the most votes were garnered by Nevzat Yalcintas of the opposition Islamic Virtue Party (FP) and State Minister Sadi Somuncuoglu of the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party, which is part of the ruling coalition.

Sezer won support from the leaderships of all the major parties. His candidacy was officially supported by all parties represented in parliament—social democrats, conservatives, fascists and Islamists. The social democratic Republican Peoples Party, the former state party of the founder of the Turkish republic, Kemal Attaturk, which lost its parliamentary seats in the last election, also welcomed Sezer, as did the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Peoples Party (HADEP). The latter provides most of the mayors in the Kurdish populated southeast of Turkey.

According to Turkish newspapers the military had no objections to Sezer. Following the shock of Demirel's failure to gain a second term, the press in the US, Europe and throughout the West reacted to the choice of Sezer with a mixture of relief and enthusiasm. Sezer was described as an honest “law-abiding man”, a “reformer” and “democrat”, who will drive forward the transformation of Turkey and its accommodation to the West.

Notwithstanding this reaction, the run-up to Sezer's nomination and election militates against the belief that he will inaugurate a new period of democracy and stability. The collapse of the proposals to amend the constitution came about because it was not possible to reach a consensus between the military, fascist, Islamic and Kurdish nationalist forces.

The frantic search for a successor was initially fruitless. Finally, the military once again publicly intervened into national politics. The general staff made clear that it did not favour candidates who were implicated in corruption. The tight mesh of Mafia, state, politics and business is increasingly regarded by sections of the military and employers as an obstacle to the opening up of the country to Western capital.

The military top brass came down against the leaders of the two conservative parties, Tansu Ciller of the opposition TPP (True Path Party) and, in particular, Mesut Yilmaz of the ANAP, one of the parties in the governing coalition. In addition, the generals insisted that the Islamists have no influence over the future president, while stressing the need to avoid a collapse of the selection procedure and the calling of new parliamentary elections.

Sezer was the only candidate who had no seat in parliament. He has never been a member of a party, has no political experience and has no solid power base behind him. These political weaknesses made him appear harmless to all political camps, which calculated he would not be able to play a role in their mutual power struggles. As if to underline these weaknesses, Sezer himself spoke

in favour of curtailing presidential powers before he became president.

Nevertheless, his election has brought to the surface the profound disagreements that exist within the Turkish establishment. In the first two rounds of voting, Yilmaz was unable to block the candidacy of his party friend and parliamentary speaker Akbulut. The candidacy of state minister Somuncuoglu led to violent conflicts inside the MHP fraction. The party leadership around Vice President Devlet Bahçeli reacted to Somuncuoglu's candidacy with extreme nervousness. Somuncuoglu is an old cadre of the Grey Wolves and apparently speaks for the discontent of the fascist party's grass roots membership against Sezer's reputedly liberal intentions.

Most deputies of the Islamist FP apparently voted against Sezer, although the party's leader Recai Kutan had praised him highly and the FP had officially supported Sezer. Among many Islamists he is regarded as too heavily orientated to Kemalism and the military.

For its part, the military made no official comment on Sezer. Nevertheless the general staff pointedly stayed away from traditional receptions held this year and last under the chairmanship of Sezer to celebrate the anniversary of the constitutional court. At the receptions, appeals were made for more freedom of speech and legalisation of the Kurdish language.

It is not possible to say with any certainty where Sezer stands—which is precisely why he was elected president. His career shows little to justify his elevation as a “democratic reformer”. Now 58, he began his career as a judge in the suppressed Kurdish provinces in the southeast of Turkey during the turmoil of the 60s and 70s. This means he could not have handed down anything resembling liberal decisions. Following the military putsch in 1980 he was, moreover, promoted by the junta to the highest court of appeal.

His activities in this post must have so impressed the leader of the putsch, General Kenan Evren, that in 1988 the latter, at that time president, called Sezer to the constitutional court. It is an historical irony that as Sezer was being elevated to the position of president, a state attorney who sought to prosecute Evren, the “Turkish Pinochet”, was removed from his post.

In the period following Sezer's elevation to the constitutional court, the Kurdish conflict escalated. A state of emergency was declared and state security forces waged a systematic campaign of terror, aided by right-wing bands of gangsters and death squads operating in the Kurdish province. In 1994 elected representatives of the

Kurdish nationalist DEP were transported directly from parliament to prison cells and their party was banned. Sezer never objected to these actions, only insisting that they be accompanied by the appropriate “legal procedures”.

In 1998 he became chairman of the constitutional court. Shortly before the government of the Islamic Welfare Party was forced to resign by the military in a behind-the-scenes putsch, Sezer worked to ban the party. He also supported the ban on head scarves in public buildings, especially schools and universities, while advocating changes to the law to facilitate political persecution and bans on parties.

Today Sezer calls for more democracy and the rule of law, while at the same time calling for the defence of the state against Islamism and Kurdish nationalism.

It is likely that the general enthusiasm for the “democratic reformer” will fade quickly—too contradictory are the interests which lie behind the “democracy” which all sides profess to support. With the economic and social restructuring of the country such contradictions are bound to grow.

Government representatives have declared their intent to impose privatisation amounting to \$50 billion over the next five years, and to allow the influx of foreign capital to the sum of \$5 billion per year. To this end it is necessary to further open the economy and step up the pace of deregulation. On top of these plans are structural reforms demanded by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

Who is to profit from these policies at the expense of the impoverished majority of the population, and how will political stability be secured? These are questions which will have to be fought out. Sezer will not be able to cover up the real state of affairs for very long.



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