

What lies behind the political crisis in Turkey?

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20 July 2002

Turkey's current government is collapsing. The government, a coalition of the social democratic Democratic Left (DSP) of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, the neo-fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP—Grey Wolves) of Vice Premier Devlet Bahçeli, and Mesut Yılmaz's conservative Motherland Party (ANAP), lost its absolute majority following the resignation of 59 deputies and seven ministers and state secretaries earlier this month.

At the request of the strongest remaining faction in the government, the MHP, parliament is to reconvene September 1, during its traditional summer break, to decide on early elections.

Precipitating the break-up of the governing coalition is pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United States and the European Union (EU) for Turkey to take further steps in reorganising its economy and enacting certain political changes. For a number of months influential sections of the Turkish business community and media have conducted a campaign in support of Western demands. At the same time, since the events of September 11 and the US "war on terrorism," extreme right-wing and nationalist forces have gone onto the offensive.

The government had long ago lost popular support, but not because it was reluctant to implement the demands made by Western governments and business concerns. Quite the opposite. At the beginning of last year the Turkish president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, supported by sections of the military, deliberately provoked a confrontation with Prime Minister Ecevit, whom he accused of being negligent in the struggle against corruption and nepotism.

This provoked a banking crisis and collapse of the Turkish currency, whereupon the IMF and the World Bank demanded a radical opening up of the economy to foreign capital in exchange for a credit amounting to \$16 billion. The former vice chairman of the World Bank and political independent Kemal Dervis was flown to Turkey to implement this programme as a head of a super-ministry incorporating business and finance.

The IMF reforms resulted in a social catastrophe for the Turkish people. Within the space of a few months hundreds of thousands lost their jobs, and already low basic wages lost half their value. Tens of thousands of Turkish workers took to the streets in protest, but in vain. Concerned with the potential loss of votes, government ministers eased back on the rate of privatisation of concerns such as Telekom and Turkish Airlines. But the non-elected Dervis insisted on his course, and a number of ministers were forced to go.

The ruthless manner in which the government implemented its policies made it broadly despised. According to recent opinion polls, none of the coalition partners could be sure of obtaining the 10 percent vote necessary under the Turkish constitution to obtain representation

in the government. However, the one party that did receive a new impulse after September 11 was the extreme right-wing MHP. Although the party had participated in all the attacks on the Turkish people called for by international capital, the party posed as a popular tribune, appealing in an unscrupulous manner to nationalism and anti-Kurdish chauvinism.

The European Union laid down a number of demands making Turkish membership in the EU conditional on the resolution of the Kurdish conflict, including the legalisation of Kurdish media and education, the lifting of the state of emergency in Kurdish areas, increased political control of the military and a resolution of the country's protracted dispute with Greece over the island of Cyprus. The MHP rejects all of these proposals, as well the plans for the further privatisation of the economy. The confidence with which the party operates reflects the fact that it has the support of powerful sections of the Turkish military.

Nationalist forces have also been strengthened by American policies. Turkey's geo-strategic position means that the country is a key front-line state and military base for the Bush government and its plans for unrestricted control of oil resources in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. This explains Turkey's decision (after bargaining for favourable terms) to take the leading role in the military security force in Kabul.

At the same time, Turkey's international commitments are proving to be the source of new problems. Turkey fears that a US onslaught against Iraq could only destabilise the entire region. In particular, Ankara fears that a consequence of such an attack could be the creation of a Kurdish state in the northern province of Iraq, which, in turn, would encourage the Kurdish independence movement inside Turkey itself.

On Tuesday of last week US Deputy Defense Minister Paul Wolfowitz flew to Ankara to dispel Turkish worries about a possible Kurdish state in Iraq. Wolfowitz assured Turkey that it remained a very important ally of Washington, and attempted to convince government officials that it was possible to depose Saddam Hussein without provoking "regional political disturbances."

Wolfowitz had put off his planned trip a number of times because of the prolonged illness of Prime Minister Ecevit. The fact that he has gone ahead with his visit, although there is no discernible improvement in Ecevit's health and political instability is growing in Turkey, indicates that, despite claims to the contrary, plans for a US assault against Iraq are being systematically pursued.

A largely unnoticed but politically significant development in Turkey is the revival in recent months of plans for a pipeline from the port of Baku in Azerbaijan through Tiflis in Georgia to the

Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in Turkey. Initial steps in the project were taken during the Clinton presidency, but because of Russian and Iranian opposition and mixed support among major oil firms, it never properly got off the ground.

After September 11, however, Russian President Putin withdrew his opposition to the project. Both the European Bank for Construction and Development and the World Bank are prepared to provide financial support. The Bush administration has sent troops to Georgia and, for military purposes, lifted a 10-year embargo of Azerbaijan.

In February of this year, with express reference to the Baku-Ceyhan project, Turkey concluded military partnerships with Georgia and Azerbaijan. Turkey has also assumed responsibility for the modernisation of the armies of both countries, the governments of which had earlier expressed their desire to join NATO.

The main consequence of these developments has been the encouragement of a variety of nationalist forces, including the MHP, who reject any concessions on the Kurdish and Cyprus issues, and are opposed to any further opening up of the economy. This stance has incurred the displeasure of the EU and IMF. In particular, the IMF is urging an acceleration of privatisation, the wiping out of jobs in public service, a reduction in the inflation rate, and additional measures favourable to foreign investors.

Opposition to the nationalists has been growing in recent months among sections of Turkish big business, especially those elements represented by the employers' federation, TÜSIAD. In full-page ads and public statements, the employers, supported by influential newspapers, are calling for the imminent implementation of EU demands.

The EU has a summit scheduled for December this year to discuss the admission of candidate applicants. One of the candidates for entry is Cyprus, which remains divided between Greek domination in the south and Turkish control in the north. If Cyprus is accepted as an EU member before any resolution of the long-standing conflict, Turkey has threatened to annex the north of the island. This would amount to an illegal occupation of an EU state. Should Cyprus's membership bid be turned down, Greece has threatened to use its right of veto to prevent any new members being accepted by the EU.

Last week the crisis in Turkey intensified dramatically. Reports surfaced that moves were under way to force Ecevit to resign, with his job to be taken by his vice-prime minister and closest party colleague, Hüsamettin Özkan, and the MHP to be replaced in the governing coalition by the conservative opposition party led by Tansu Ciller, the Party of the Right Path (DYP). In response, MHP leader Bahçeli called for new elections.

Ecevit promptly sacked Özkan and thereby unleashed a wave of resignations from the government and his own party, including the final and most prominent departure—that of Foreign Minister Ismail Cem.

Together with Özkan, and with overwhelming support from domestic and foreign media sources, Cem has called for the foundation of a new party, which would be formally based on social democratic lines but pledged to broadly implement the programme demanded by the EU and IMF. Finance Minister Dervis declared his allegiance to such a new political formation, and was immediately called upon to resign by Ecevit.

In light of recent turbulence on Turkish financial markets, President Sezer has been reluctant to accept Dervis's resignation. As a result, Dervis remains in office even though he has declared his support for the opposition forces that are seeking to bring down the government.

The so-called “troika” has been described by the international and domestic press as Turkey's new hope. The credentials of the leaders of the proposed new party, as touted in the media, are as follows: Cem has good relations with the EU, Dervis has close connections with the IMF and World Bank, and Özkan is well regarded by the state bureaucracy, the employers federation TÜSIAD and the military.

Mesut Yilmaz of the Motherland Party has also cautiously indicated that he is interested in a new government, which would “rapidly implement EU reforms.” He has, however, as of now rejected the sacking of Ecevit. The latter has made his own overtures to former Turkish interior minister Saadettin Tantan—a move regarded by many as a threat to revive corruption charges raised in the past against Yilmaz, but successfully swept under the carpet until now.

Former Turkish prime minister Tansu Ciller has also declared her willingness to participate in a new government, citing her experience with war and terrorism (she was prime minister in 1993-95, at the high point of the Turkish civil war against the Kurds) and expressing her wish to be “prime minister during an American operation against Iraq.” The German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* interpreted her comments as follows: “The conservative politician has applied to the Pentagon for the post of prime minister in Ankara.”

Anonymous sources in the US State Department have signalled to the press agency AFP their approval of the collapse of the Ecevit government. Ciller, however, has been regarded as an unreliable ally since she forged a coalition with the Islamists five years ago, only to be removed later from power by the military in a “silent coup.”

The Islamists remain by far the strongest lobby in Turkish politics, despite a series of bans on their organisation and its subsequent split into two factions. According to opinion polls, the most popular party in Turkey is the moderate Islamists of the Party for Justice and Development (AKP), led by the former mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The party bases itself on diffuse anti-Western sentiments that have been nurtured by social dissatisfaction and opposition to US military operations following September 11.

In interviews, Erdogan has often been evasive, obviously concerned to offend neither the Turkish establishment nor his voters. Nevertheless, he has indicated his support for the demands of the EU and for a so-called “free market” economy.



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