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The April 18 Elections: Stability Remains Elusive

On May 3, the day after all the newly elected members — except the female Islamist parliamentarian who would not take off her Islamic headscarf — were sworn in at the Grand National Assembly (GNA), President Suleyman Demirel assigned acting Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, the leader of the Democratic Left Party (DLP), with the task of forming the new government. After Ecevit embarked on consultations with the other party leaders about the formation of a new government last weekend, it is clear that the process is likely to prove excruciatingly complicated, necessitating hard choices and compromises by Ecevit, as well as the other leaders, with profound consequences for Turkish politics in the years ahead.

The DLP, which had been a junior partner in the Mesut Yilmaz-led coalition that collapsed in November 1998 and had then served as a minority government since the beginning of the year, now stands poised to continue in government as the leader of a new coalition. While no one expected that a single party would be able to get an outright majority, there was nevertheless a widespread belief (and hope) that the DLP and the Yilmaz-led Motherland Party, MP, might just be able to garner enough seats to form a coalition, probably headed by Ecevit, which would be more stable than the coalitions that governed Turkey since the 1995 elections. However, these hopes proved unfounded. Barring any unforeseen and unethical switches of party allegiance — not unknown in Turkish politics — the next coalition will inevitably involve at least three of the five parties that exceeded the 10 percent national barrier for representation in the GNA. Moreover, while the center-left DLP is the biggest party, it finds itself in a minority in a parliament dominated by parties on the right.

The parties gaining representation as a result of the April 18 elections in the 550-member GNA are as follows:

Party	Seats	% of vote
The Democratic Left Party DLP	136	22.19%
The National Action Party NAP	129	17.98%
The Virtue Party VP	111	15.41%
The Motherland Party MP	86	13.22%
The True Path Party TPP	85	12.01%
Independents	3	

The center-left Republican People's Party (RPP), with 8.72 percent of the vote, and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (PDP), with 4.76 percent, were unable to gain representation.

THE WINNERS: ECEVIT AND THE NAP

The success of the center-left DLP, which managed to garner more votes and seats in the GNA than any other party, was expected. The acceleration of the decline of the two center-right parties, the MP and the TPP, was equally predictable. Both the MP and the TPP paid dearly for their willingness to enter elections under leaders burdened by major allegations of corruption and a proven inability to appeal to the voters, and consequently suffered major losses, reducing their combined vote to 25 percent of the total. Nobody, however, predicted the spectacular growth in support for the NAP, which, after having actually failed to get over the 10 percent national barrier in the last elections, became the second leading party. In fact, the NAP success was such a surprise that it overshadowed the significant fall in support for the Islamist VP.

As widely predicted, the DLP raised its vote from 14.6 percent in the 1995 elections to more than 22 percent and captured 135 seats, compared to 76 in 1995. By projecting an image throughout the campaign of a leader in charge and confident of success, Ecevit, who had personally created and developed the DLP during the past decade, was able to convert the widespread goodwill and media support into votes. He was clearly helped by the capture just weeks before the election of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and his upcoming trial on separatist terrorism. Even more crucially, the size of his vote reflected the receptivity of the electorate to Ecevit's well-deserved reputation as an honest and incorruptible leader compared to the center-right leaders Tansu Ciller and Mesut Yilmaz, whose periods in office were marked by widespread allegations of corruption and abuse of power.

While there was widespread consensus before the election that the ultra-right NAP would return to the GNA, the doubling of its vote is a stunning personal victory for its leader, Devlet Bahçeli, who has managed to achieve the kind of electoral success that eluded the legendary founder of the party, Alpaslan Türkeş. At a broader level, the NAP success confirmed the rightward trend in Turkish politics, as was shown in particular by the willingness of a high percentage of first-time voters — more than 25 percent — to choose the NAP. The capture of the Kurdish leader Ocalan, who is held responsible for more than 30,000 deaths in Southeastern Turkey during a decade long separatist campaign, further fueled nationalist tendencies. The increasingly nationalist voters rejected the brazen and unpersuasive appeals of Ciller and Yilmaz, whose corrupt images contrasted starkly to that of the modest and austere Bahçeli. Equally significantly, a large number of voters who had voted for the Welfare Party (WP) in 1995 appear to have deserted the WP's successor, the VP, in favor of the NAP, suggesting to many observers that Turkish nationalism may well be the antidote to radical Islam.

COALITION CALCULATIONS

Although there are eight mathematically possible coalition permutations, most of these are extremely unlikely because of practical political considerations. To begin, any three-party arrangement involving the VP seems out of the question. While the TPP under the beleaguered Tansu Ciller might have been desperate or foolish enough to try a repeat of its disastrous 1996-1997 coalition with the Islamists (if the VP and TPP seats had been sufficient), both the DLP and MP had gone out of their way to reject the VP option in the campaign. The NAP, which had taken a position on the symbolically important Islamic headscarf issue close to that of the VP, is keen to move further into the mainstream from the fringe to consolidate its stunning electoral success and has also declared its reluctance to work with the VP. This was confirmed by its willingness to force a female NAP parliamentarian to dispense with her Islamic headgear for the swearing-in ceremony, in contrast to the VP, which stood its ground with its headscarf-wearing parliamentarian. For its part, the VP, which is facing internal convulsions as a result of its inability to repeat its success of 1995, seems resigned, as its leader, Recai Kutan, readily conceded to assume the task of opposition.

A coalition between the NAP, MP, and TPP also seems highly improbable. To the chagrin of their beleaguered leaders, the MP and the TPP now languish far behind the previously marginalized NAP. While the NAP might theoretically welcome the prospect of leading a coalition with the two declining center-right parties as a way of strengthening its claim to lead a realignment on the right, Bahçeli seems disinclined to participate in a right-wing coalition reminiscent of the so-called Nationalist Front coalitions of the 1970s that so polarized Turkey prior to the 1980 coup. Moreover, despite their current desperation, it is difficult to imagine the TPP and MP letting Ciller and Yılmaz agree to serve under the untested Bahçeli. Given the sizable numbers of former NAP activists in both the MP and the TPP who would be even more likely to gravitate to the NAP with such a coalition, such an arrangement looks unlikely.

AN UNLIKELY ARRANGEMENT?

In fact, there are only two likely coalition scenarios: DLP-NAP-MP or DLP-MP-TPP.

For anyone who lived through the turbulent Turkey of the 1970s when the left was fighting the right in the streets as Ecevit's RPP and the NAP confronted each other for ideological supremacy, a coalition between Ecevit and the NAP would seem unthinkable. In fact, while Ecevit had stated during the campaign that the electorate would choose his coalition partner, he has shown every indication since the election that he is reluctant to take this fateful step. Although he was careful not to speak on the issue prior to his designation, other people in his party expressed views ranging from lack of enthusiasm to outright hostility.

However, as Defense Minister Hikmet Sami Turk explained at CSIS on April 26, one of the factors pushing Ecevit into an improbable political relationship with the NAP is the fear of excluding the nationalist right, in the shape of the NAP, along with the Islamist VP and thus setting the stage for what could well be dangerous cooperation between the two radical parties in opposition against the government. Yet, as Turk readily acknowledged, the DLP's concern over such a possibility for the sake of Turkey's long-term political health would have to be calculated against cohesion within the coalition.

It is quite clear that Ecevit would prefer to see the formation of a coalition between the DSP and the two center-right parties. Ecevit had not hidden his desire for a resumption of the coalition with the MP after the election, with the DSP as the dominant partner. Yılmaz was also open about his preference for a continuation of the partnership with Ecevit. However, with the MP unable to match the DLP's success, the voters dismissed their plans. Given the need for a third coalition partner, both Ecevit and Yılmaz have been looking closely at post-election developments within the TPP, hoping that an early overthrow of Ciller would open the way to its participation in government. With Ciller showing every indication that she will fight to the bitter end, however, it seems unlikely that her political demise will come in time to permit this arrangement.

LOOKING AHEAD

If Ecevit and Bahçeli do in fact form a government with Yılmaz as their junior partner, as seems most likely, one can safely predict strains within the coalition in the near future. While Ecevit and Bahçeli will no doubt try to overcome the bitter scars of the past as they cooperate in government, and Yılmaz will make every effort to help perpetuate such a coalition in order to somehow protect himself from a post-election coup within the MP, it is unlikely that the fundamental ideological differences between the DLP and the NAP could be papered over for too long. During the first round of talks between the two leaders several potential problems emerged, such as amnesty for terrorists, and the headscarf issue, which, along with the potential banning of the Islamist VP, is at the top of the political agenda. These inevitable disagreements about policies will be accentuated by equally inevitable disputes over the placement and protection of party adherents in the key ministries, such as the Education Ministry. Moreover, if and when Ciller is finally ousted, the TPP will immediately loom as a possible alternative to the strained coalition.

Ecevit and Bahceli might actually not be averse to early elections that might follow a future political crisis. Ecevit had long resisted calls for unity on the left with the RPP, but now that his great rival, Deniz Baykal, has announced his intention to resign in the aftermath of the failure of the RPP to gain representation in the GNA, Ecevit is keen on incorporating the dispirited RPP in a union of the left under his leadership. With the combined vote of the two parties exceeding 30 percent in the elections, Ecevit might be dreaming of this route to achieving power on his own. Bahceli would not be human if he was also not dreaming of unity on the right, involving the incorporation of the disillusioned ranks of the MP and the TPP in the NAP.

THE MILITARY FACTOR

In Turkey, it is always essential to bear in mind that the ever-watchful Turkish military looms over the machinations within the GNA and the wider political arena. The elections went ahead only because the military chief of staff, Huseyin Kivrikoglu, had put his considerable weight behind them. The military establishment, which, in June 1997 was successful in bringing to an end the WP-led coalition with the TPP, is happy with the election gamble that led to a retreat in the Islamist votes. Given its confrontation with the military, it was perhaps not surprising that the VP failed to persuade a large number of likely supporters that their vote would not be wasted, as the VP would not be allowed into government under any circumstances. While the VP still has the strongest party organization and managed to win the most important mayoral races in Istanbul and Ankara, it faces considerable obstacles, legal as well as political, fully backed by the military, as it tries to further define and reconsolidate its position in the Turkish political system. The military will also watch closely the mostly Kurdish PDP, which slightly increased the vote it received in the 1995 elections while winning a large number of municipal elections in the southeast.

Despite Ecevit's occasional statements in the past about the need to accommodate moderate Islam, as the vociferous DLP reaction to the headscarf shows, the DLP has now willingly taken on the burden of cooperating with the military establishment in the maintenance of the secular system. Consequently, Turkish politics in the near future will be determined to a great extent by even closer cooperation between the DLP, the military, and President Demirel, whose role beyond the expiration of his term in office in May 2000 remains unclear.

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