

Turkey: Ecevit Government in Crisis

An Intelligence Assessment

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May 1979

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Information as of 24 May 1979 has been used in preparing this report.



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Overview

The chances of Bulent Ecevit's left-of-center government surviving the country's worsening internal security and economic crises have further diminished. Ecevit's efforts to balance political imperatives against the need for quick, decisive action have produced measures that are frequently too little or too late.

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Political violence—back to pre-martial law levels—has become significantly more destabilizing, with the terrorists resorting to the killing of prominent Turks and Americans. Kurdish separatist organizations have been encouraged by events in neighboring Iran to step up their demands for autonomy. The economy is in such bad shape that even the promised international assistance—which is contingent on Turkey's still problematical compliance with International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommendations—would be no more than palliative if not accompanied by structural changes.

Important sectors of the government's constituency have gradually been alienated—Ecevit is now one vote shy of a parliamentary majority. After first angering the conservatives in his government and then the leftists, Ecevit is now losing the support of other key groups. Businessmen, who take credit for Ecevit's accession to power, have called on him to step down. The ever watchful military has grown impatient with the civilian leaders' politicking and has begun to assert itself more in the making of internal security policy. An influential general has advocated tougher laws, and the leader of the 1971 "coup by memorandum," who is now a senator and presidential hopeful, has gone so far as to call for a more authoritarian constitution. Even labor has soured on Ecevit because of his economic policies and his acquiescence in the military's May Day clampdown on labor and leftists.

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Ecevit still hopes to emerge from his Republican People's Party (RPP) convention that opened 24 May with his waning strength relatively intact. He might then limp along until the October senatorial election, hoping that foreign aid will rescue the failing economy and give him another boost. Even if he survives until then, however, a defeat at the polls seems likely to follow. Moreover, whatever Ecevit's individual fate, growing numbers of Turks are

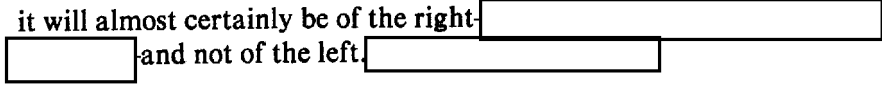
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fed up with weak governments and politics-as-usual. Support for an "above-parties" government is on the increase and some Turks even talk about a more basic "reform" of the political system itself, which might lead to military involvement. A weak government in Ankara will continue to make for strains in Turkey's relations with its allies, and in the longer term so too would an authoritarian one. If Turkey does move toward authoritarianism, it will almost certainly be of the right-

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and not of the left-

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Political Violence: Growing Inexorably

The persistence and acceleration of violence have made it clear that Ecevit's brand of martial law "with a human face" has not deterred left or right extremists. There is once again an average of three deaths per day. More than half the killings have occurred in martial law provinces, which, since the inclusion of six largely Kurdish provinces on 26 April, now number 19. Ominously, extremists have now raised their sights to include more consequential targets, such as prominent political leaders, journalists, and businessmen. In a repetition of the progression of events that led to the 1971 coup, moreover, two US servicemen were killed recently; anti-American acts of violence and vandalism in 1979 already surpass last year's total. [Redacted]

Inflation is now at an annual rate of 70 percent and rising. Some of the enterprises belonging to the large and inefficient state economic sector spent their entire allocation only three months into the fiscal year, and virtually all government expenditures are now for salaries. [Redacted]

Ecevit last week turned down IMF recommendations entailing a 50-percent devaluation of the lira, tax and price increases, and other austerity measures, alleging—perhaps correctly—that they are not politically feasible. Negotiations for a new IMF standby accord are now in abeyance. Ecevit hopes that potential OECD donor countries will still hold their planned pledging session on 30 May and that some of them will provide funds regardless of the IMF's refusal to give a green light. Armed with such support, he claims, the government might then do what it has so long failed to do. [Redacted]

Reenter The Kurds

The relentless violence in the urban areas has been accompanied by growing tension in the underdeveloped eastern provinces, where ideological differences feed on sectarian and ethnic rivalries. There, the conflict between members of Sunni and Alevi Islamic sects that prompted the imposition of martial law last December has been followed by a resurgence of Kurdish unrest that has led to gunsmuggling, increased contacts with Iranian and Iraqi Kurds, and a trend toward more frequent clashes. This has alarmed Turkish leaders and prompted them to augment their forces in the eastern provinces. The Kurds have historically posed the only real threat to the integrity of the Turkish state, and Ankara's fears may reflect some hypersensitivity. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Kurdish separatist sentiment is rising and adding to the problems of the beleaguered Turkish leaders. [Redacted]

Political Fallout: Ecevit Government Totters

The dual crises—political and economic—have exacted a heavy toll in the last few weeks on a government that was not very strong or cohesive to begin with. Ecevit's balancing act between his party's truculent left wing—which includes most Turkish leftists and many Alevis and Kurds—and the more conservative independents in his government has required even greater dexterity. [Redacted]

The Economy: No Improvement in Sight

In the economic area, the government's continued unwillingness and inability to take more stringent belt-tightening measures have led to what IMF officials have called an "alarming situation." [Redacted]

Ecevit initially succeeded in forging a compromise whereby martial law would be expanded to those provinces but would be sweetened with economic assistance. Three leftwing deputies bolted, however, amid growing polarization that led even to fistfights within the party. Further defections are possible.

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Ecevit now has only 226 votes in the 450-seat lower house—one short of a majority, since the speaker cannot vote. While the opposition parties would have trouble mustering the absolute majority necessary to oust him, the government is virtually immobilized. [redacted]

military's own initiative and that Ecevit only grudgingly acquiesced. [redacted]

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The Businessmen's "Memorandum"

The failure to come to grips with economic problems and the government's heavy hand in implementing those measures it does take have also provoked a businessmen's revolt. Two major business groups last week criticized government economic policies, especially growing state ownership and interference with the private sector. [redacted]

Even more indicative of the strain on civilian-military relations and the political system are the recent statements of General Necdet Urug and retired General, now Senator, Muhsin Batur. Urug called on parliament to enact tougher internal security legislation and to broaden police powers, while Batur—a driving force in the 1971 "coup by memorandum"—proposed that the liberal 1961 Constitution be replaced by a new charter drawn up by nonpolitical personalities and then approved by parliament in a spirit of nonpartisanship. The emphasis of the new constitution, said Batur, should be on the rights of the state over those of the individual, and of order over liberty. [redacted]

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In a particularly scathing declaration, one of the associations accused the government of trying to "kill free enterprise" and violating the mixed-economy guarantees of the Constitution that it termed the basis of the pluralist system. The declaration ended by calling on all concerned people, including President Koruturk, to "do their duty." [redacted]

Batur, who is also a presidential hopeful, emphasized that his statement was a personal view and not yet another "memorandum." He is influential in both military and political circles, however, and may be reflecting the sentiment of some elements in both. In what may be an additional measure of the growing influence of the military, [redacted]

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To this challenge Ecevit angrily replied that a government cannot be replaced by a businessmen's memorandum. His anger may betray considerable uneasiness, however, for pressure from the business sector may have been the determining factor in persuading the independent ministers to throw their support to Ecevit in January 1978. [redacted]

[redacted]

Military More Assertive

The mood in the military, meanwhile, is one of growing frustration. Foremost among its concerns is that its reputation for effectiveness is being eroded. The officers have weighed in more forcefully with Ecevit with demands for tougher measures. They instigated, for example, the ultimatum of the six independent ministers, emphasizing to them the gravity of the situation in the Kurdish areas. They later confronted Ecevit directly, demanding that he expand martial law to counteract the "open rebellion" among military units over the internal security situation. [redacted]

The RPP Convention

Against a backdrop of such ferment and discontent in and out of government, Ecevit will be fortunate to emerge from his party's convention without major bruises. It is not so much his leadership of the party that will be challenged—there is no one of comparable stature—as the one-man show he tries to run and the makeup of his cabinet. [redacted]

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[redacted] Indications are, moreover, that the military show of force in Istanbul on May Day—including the arrest of several leftist labor and political leaders—was taken on the

Ecevit's loyalists, the socialist-leaning professionals and intellectuals who comprise the so-called Third World faction, seem to have a slight numerical edge over the centrist and leftist factions led by Ali Topuz and Deniz Baykal, respectively. The centrists and leftists intend to join forces, however, in the fight for cabinet and party posts. These struggles as well as the program debate could result in more bloodletting and defections. [redacted]

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Ecevit's Prospects and Possible Successors

The outlook for Turkey is thus grim on almost every front. Propelled by its own inner dynamic, violence is more likely to grow both in scope and intensity and claim many more prominent Turks and at least some Americans as its victims. There is no end in sight to the wage-price spiral, and further material shortages owing to the lack of foreign exchange are in the offing. Even if the government were to take the necessary austerity measures, the short-term effect would be socially and politically disruptive. [redacted]

Ecevit could fall at any time, but he might linger on in a crippled state for many more months. At the same time, it is unlikely that any successor party government would have the strength or the will to do better, and some might well do worse in terms of Turkish and Western interests. Under such circumstances, the military may gradually involve itself more directly in the political process, either to provide that strength and will or to force constitutional and institutional changes that would have the same effect. [redacted]

With the military—though obviously hesitant—standing in the wings, there is no prospect that the extreme left could take advantage of the current confusion and chaos to bring to power a radical regime. The strife in Turkey is essentially the result of a rightist reaction to the relatively recent emergence of a left—as was the case in interwar Europe—and since the military is essentially conservative, such changes would be in the direction of a rightist and possibly corporatist state. The extreme left is noisy and well-armed, but it is no match for forces like the military that back the existing order. [redacted]

Should the government survive the potentially divisive RPP convention this week, it could, despite all the odds against it, hold out until the senate election in October and beyond. Its prospects for survival would increase if it could persuade those who left the government to return or if it could entice some in the opposition—most likely its former coalition partner, the Islamic-oriented National Salvation Party—to enter the government. Ecevit would also benefit if the OECD countries pledged a substantial amount of aid and delivered a portion of it soon. Despite every indication that his party will be the biggest loser at the polls in October, moreover, Ecevit's tenacity may impel him to

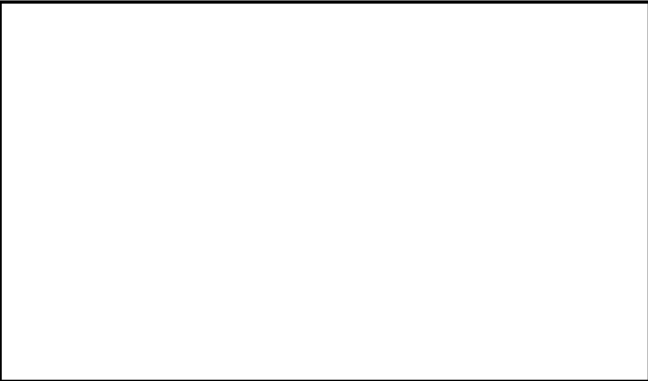
defy the public's will since the opposition may still lack the votes in the lower house to bring him down. [redacted]

More likely, however, the Ecevit government will fall either before the October election or in its wake. It is clear that the patience of key groups such as business and the military is wearing thin. It is also clear that groups such as these carry substantial influence with the right wing of Ecevit's party and with the independent ministers. The military, moreover, by continuing to assert itself on internal security policy, could again force Ecevit to take action that would alienate more of his left wing. Nor do any of the opposition parties seem enthused about boarding what appears to them to be a sinking ship. A dramatic improvement in the economy and public order could, of course, improve Ecevit's prospects, but neither seems likely. [redacted]

Should the Ecevit government collapse, there could be a revival of the conservative three-party coalition led by the center-right Justice Party and including the National Salvation Party and the neo-fascist National Action Party. Such a grouping would probably experience the same kind of bickering and immobilism that characterized its first stint in office. And while it would not have to placate a left wing that has compelled Ecevit to be truculent toward Turkey's allies, the chauvinism of the two minor parties would have the same effect. Alternatively, Justice might try to secure the return of those who defected to Ecevit and others in the hope of ruling alone. At best, such a government would be as weak and divided as Ecevit's. Finally, the parties might agree to hold a new national election, but it is doubtful given existing party strengths that any one would secure a clear cut-majority. [redacted]

While it is possible that maneuvering among the parties and their leaders could prolong basically the present situation for some time, the Turkish electorate and key elements of the establishment seem to be growing progressively less tolerant of the prospect of an Ecevit government that limps along indefinitely, or for a similarly weak successor. Sentiment is growing for an above-parties government supported by the centrist and moderate forces in both major parties. Other Turks, particularly the right and in the military, wonder whether the Constitution of the Second Repub-

lic, in diluting authority with its provisions for proportional representation and strong guarantees of civil and group liberties, does not go too far. [redacted]



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In any case, the longer Turkey's politicians take to respond to the growing demand for more responsible politics, the greater the possibility that those in the military and elsewhere who value effectiveness over free-wheeling politics will take matters into their own hands and install an above-parties government or rule directly. Both public disorders and economic troubles have in fact long ago surpassed the thresholds that led to the 1960 and 1971 military interventions. And it is no doubt a measure of the strength of the democratic impulse in Turkey—and of the heightened reluctance of the military to assert itself openly—that these problems have not yet provoked a third praetorian experiment [redacted]

The West would of course be better off in its dealings with Turkey were there a stronger government in Ankara. Parliamentary arithmetic, however, does not augur well for a strong party government, while the comportment of Turkey's political leaders makes it questionable whether they would agree to an above-parties government without some sort of pressure from the military. In the short run, Turkey's allies might also do better with a military-backed government, but the long-term costs would be high given that the tie between Turkey and the West hinges as much on Turkey's credentials as a democracy as on its strategic position. [redacted]

Foreign Policy Ramifications

Ecevit's nationalism, his need to placate the left wing of his party, and his desire to improve relations with the Soviet Union all combined to make Turkey a difficult ally even before domestic economic and security problems came to a head. These factors have impelled Ecevit to lambaste Turkey's allies even while he clings to the hope that the same allies will bail out his government. [redacted]

[redacted] Now that Turkey's strategic importance has been enhanced by the Iranian upheaval and the West's urgent need for new SALT II verification sites, Ecevit has adopted a cautious and calculating posture as he seeks to win maximum benefits for Turkey. [redacted]

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