

TURKEY in FOCUS

Issue: 2
January 2004
TS/WSH/04-004

IN THE WAKE OF ELECTIONS: NEW QUEST FOR CYPRUS SETTLEMENT

Asli Gurkan
agurkan@tusiad.us

"Turkey in Focus" is a new service initiated by TUSIAD Washington Office that provides update on issues related to Turkey on a monthly basis.

The December 14 elections in Northern Cyprus ended in a stalemate, with the pro-EU opposition and pro-government parties equally splitting the 50 seats in parliament. The largest opposition **Republican Turkish Party (CTP)** led by Mehmet Ali Talat managed to take the lead by receiving 35 percent of the vote and 19 seats; while the ruling **National Unity Party (UBP)** led by former Prime Minister Dervis Eroglu came in second with 33 percent of the vote and 18 seats. Mustafa Akinci's **Peace and Democracy Movement (BDH)**, allied with CTP under the banner of United Forces, received 13 percent of the vote and won 6 seats. **The Democrat Party (DP)** led by Serdar Denktas, the son of President Rauf Denktas, received 13 percent of the vote and netted 7 seats. As a result, CTP and BDH received 48 percent of the votes and 25 seats in total, as opposed to the 46 percent of the votes and 25 seats received by the members of the ruling coalition parties, UBP and DP. Although the elections left the two blocs evenly balanced, CTP tripled its votes, whereas UBP's votes declined by more than 20 percent compared to its last election results.

In the wake of the elections, President Denktas opened talks with leaders of the four parties who passed the 5 % parliamentary threshold and soon enough he called on the election winner Talat to form the next Turkish Cypriot government. Beside its ally, BDH, the CTP leader needs to gain the support of either the National Unity Party or the Democrat Party to form a majority government. The CTP leader, according to the Turkish Cypriot laws, has a total of 15 days to conclude his efforts and the first week of his mandate has already ended amid unfruitful consultations with outgoing Prime minister Dervis Eroglu. Meanwhile, all eyes are on Ankara, as Turkey is also in the midst of deliberations to determine the way forward on the Cyprus question. Its approach to the Annan plan will be as crucial to a Cyprus settlement as the next government in Northern Cyprus.

Government Scenarios

Talat-Eroglu Partnership: Despite Talat's earlier remarks that an alliance with Eroglu would be extremely difficult due to fundamental ideological differences, he declined to rule out any configuration, including a wide government coalition of four parties, provided that it is dedicated to the resolution of the Cyprus deadlock. Talat made his first offer to Eroglu, in an attempt to unite the two parties with the largest number of parliamentary seats. Yet, the CTP-UBP talks collapsed on January 5 amid a disagreement that erupted after Eroglu sent Talat a letter demanding the CTP leader to respond to questions on how to negotiate the Annan plan, while protecting the rights of Turkish Cypriots. Talat called the move insincere and careless, intended to waste his limited 15-day mandate. Meanwhile, Talat also conveyed his own set of questions to the outgoing Prime Minister, revealing his continuing skepticism on Eroglu's willingness to form a coalition government with CTP and his commitment to the Cyprus settlement based on the Annan plan prior to May 1, 2004.

Talat-Denktaş-Akinci Coalition: The same day the CTP-UBP negotiations failed, Talat held separate meetings with DP leader Serdar Denktaş, and BDH leader Mustafa Akinci, in an attempt to form a CTP-BDH-DP coalition, the only other viable formula to secure a majority in parliament. Even prior to Talat's mandate, many analysts had put their bet on such a tripartite arrangement, as Serdar Denktaş is considered relatively more compromising on the Annan plan than Eroglu. BDH leader Akinci's remarks favoring such a formula increased the likelihood of this kind of a government. Yet, its application depends on Denktaş's willingness to accept BDH as a coalition partner. He had earlier dismissed any possibility of sharing office with Akinci.

If Talat is unable to seal the deal with DP by the end of the week, President Denktaş would most likely give the mandate to Dervis Eroglu, the party that received the second largest vote. However, he still needs to convince either Talat or Akinci to join his coalition, which is highly unlikely to happen if Talat's current efforts fail.

Early elections: Under the Turkish Cypriot law, Northern Cyprus will have to hold early elections should the parties elected to parliament fail to form a majority government within 60 days. Following the December 14 polls, CTP leader Talat declared his intentions to avoid a new round of elections that, he said, would leave no time for efforts to reach a settlement in the island prior to May 2004, the date when the island (with or without Turkish Cypriots) is set to join the European Union. This approach has also been backed by Ankara, as Foreign Minister Gül had expressed support for a broad-based four-party coalition. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan confirmed this stance as he summoned the four Turkish Cypriot political party leaders for talks in Ankara on the sidelines of the most recent January 8 summit among top Turkish civilian and military leaders. The Turkish Prime Minister reportedly urged the Turkish Cypriot leaders to form a government at once so as to have the full capacity to push for the resumption of negotiations.

Denktas's Fate As Chief Negotiator: A key pillar in the opposition parties' election campaign rhetoric has been the intention to remove President Rauf Denktas from his position as chief negotiator in the Cyprus talks and to replace him by a representative of the new government. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, Talat was still pressing the idea. Yet, his January 6 comments to the press indicated that he could back down from this objective. He told reporters that the authority to implement such a decision has not been granted to them by the Turkish Cypriot people, and quoted the relevant constitutional article holding that "the executive powers shall be carried out and exercised jointly by the President and government".

The CTP leader also asserted that sharing similar views with Turkey regarding the role Denktas plays in the U.N.-brokered Cyprus negotiations carries utmost importance if the Turkish Cypriot party is to play its cards well. Talat's shift in rhetoric followed remarks by Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul. The latter stated, during an interview with *CNN-Turk* on January 4, that Ankara backed preserving Denktas as the chief Turkish Cypriot negotiator in settlement talks. "President Denktas has become a symbol in TRNC. We want him to lead negotiations after the new Turkish Cypriot government is in place" Gul said.

Turkey Stepping Up Efforts; Reevaluating Annan Plan

Following polls in Northern Cyprus, Ankara acted swiftly in calling for the launch of negotiations based on the Annan plan. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated: "In my view it is wrong to say the Annan plan is completely bad for northern Cyprus. We have always said that the plan is negotiable." He even suggested that Denktas get rid of his advisors who failed to provide any constructive views on how to solve the deadlock for all these years, a comment widely quoted in the Turkish press.

Yet both Turkish and Turkish Cypriot officials denied the media reports that highlighted tensions between Denktas and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. The Turkish government and the Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas jointly summoned the EU to exert equal pressure on the Greek Cypriots to settle the Cyprus conflict. "Those who expect to ensure a solution through the unilateral surrender of the Turkish side are in a grave illusion," Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul stated.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan elucidated that Ankara was in the midst of preparations to propose certain revisions to the Annan plan. A report published in *Cumhuriyet* daily claimed that, on December 30, Foreign Ministry officials briefed the Prime Minister on a recently prepared ministry document that envisages a solution based on the plan but with several adjustments. The ministry document reportedly includes a series of proposed maps offering alternatives for territorial redistribution on the island. The document, *Cumhuriyet* alleged, accepts lowering the number of Turkish soldiers in northern Cyprus from around 30,000 to 6,000 within 40 months. It also foresees Turkey and Greece maintaining their guarantor status on the island and specifies that the number of residents from Turkey and Greece should not exceed five percent on each side. *Cumhuriyet* article also argued that the military has been irked by the "submissive" stance of the foreign ministry report in demanding modifications to the Annan plan.

The Turkish General Staff responded rapidly by issuing a statement on January 5 that rebuffed speculations of a rift between the military and the ministry on Turkey's Cyprus policy. "The news report does not reflect the truth," the General Staff statement said. "The Turkish Armed Forces believe in the importance and necessity of finding a just and durable solution to the Cyprus problem through negotiations." A similar statement, issued the same day by the foreign ministry, backed General Staff's objections.

Nevertheless, Ankara is no doubt re-evaluating its official policy towards Cyprus. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer chaired a summit meeting at the Presidential Palace on January 8 to discuss the issue, attended by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, and Chief of General Staff Gen. Hilmi Ozkok. While the final policy decisions will be taken at the upcoming National Security Council meeting to be held on January 23, the statement issued after the critical summit affirms, "Turkey continues its support for the good offices of the UN secretary general and confirms its political determination for the speedy achievement of a settlement based on the realities of the island through negotiations." The government sources had also announced earlier that President Sezer would host a second summit at a later date, this time with the participation of TRNC President Denktas and the new Turkish Cypriot prime minister.

What's ahead

Whatever form the next Turkish Cypriot government may take, Cyprus has entered a period of hope for a settlement in the post-December 14 setting. Both Turkish and the Turkish Cypriot authorities in the past few weeks signaled a significant shift in policy and demonstrated a readiness to end the 40-year-old impasse. While it seems a certainty that the Annan Plan is back on the table, the ongoing deliberations in Turkey about new proposals to modify the plan will be crucial in determining whether a policy shift would be enough to break the stalemate in the island. The willingness to take the Annan Plan to a referendum would be the most tangible indicator of such a change of attitude.

The Turkish Prime Minister's consultations with the UN and US authorities during his upcoming visit to the United States at the end of January 2004 would be an important stage for intensifying international efforts to solve the Cyprus problem prior to May 1, 2004. Provided that Ankara's proposals are acceptable to both sides in Cyprus and are not perceived as a deviation from the fundamentals of the Annan Plan, the next five months will be vital in determining the future of the island.