

# Turks pin hopes on secular parties

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THE murky waters of Turkish politics, thoroughly stirred up by an inconclusive general election on Christmas Eve, remain as inscrutable as ever, if not more so.

Turkish voters sent a couple of clear messages, though: Turkey is not ready for a pro-Islamic government. At least not this time round.

Voters were also saying to their secular politicians: If you go on messing things up the way you have so far, do not count on our vote during the next election.

When the election result became clear, the sigh of relief in the West was almost audible. A member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, strategically located on the borders of the former Soviet Union, Iran, Iraq and Syria, had been saved from the clutches of forces not unduly well-disposed toward the alliance, democracy and other things Western.

But things are less clear-cut for the secular majority of Turks.

Most are thoroughly bewildered by the rumours being promulgated by Turkey's highly imaginative media, which have an armoury of axes to grind and rarely let minor details such as truth and facts get in the way of a good story.

No party having emerged a clear winner, a phase of intense and messy haggling has begun.

In this high-stakes game, there are three main players:

- The pro-Islamic Welfare Party (Refah), which has the most seats in parliament, but not enough to form a government on its own;

- Prime Minister Tansu Ciller's conservative True Path party, which lost seats in placing second but surprised



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most analysts who had predicted a more severe drubbing

- And finally there is the centre-right Motherland Party, which placed a close third. It is led by Mrs. Ciller's bitter rival, Mesut Yilmaz.

Minor roles go to a couple of smaller, left-of-centre parties whose support will be crucial to the formation of a new government coalition, whether with or without the dreaded Welfare Party.

Necmettin Erbakan, the Welfare Party's septuagenarian leader, has been flashing his victorious beaming smile and thumbs-up all over Turkey's proliferating private television stations since the election. He is insisting on what he says is his democratic right to be granted first shot at forming a government.

It may also be his last, which would explain his eagerness to take over what in many eyes amounts to a poisoned chalice, namely a debt-ridden, corrupt and inflationary economy. For good measure, add to that a dirty war being fought against Kurdish seekers of autonomy.

Though the main secular parties may find the idea repugnant, they may be better served by President Suleiman Demirel allowing Mr. Erbakan to try his hand at gathering a working majority in the 550-seat Grand National Assembly, and in all probability failing.

That way they can avoid Welfare Party Islamists feeling too hard done by, and possibly taking their frustrations to the streets. However, post-

poning the formation of a new government perhaps a further 45 days is also a gesture that Turkey can ill afford.

The business community is pressing Motherland and True Path to get their act together and start combating chronic economic problems.

Ever pragmatic, the same people are openly calling for the hitherto unspeakable (at least without courting a long prison sentence), namely a political solution to the "Kurdish problem."

Then the largely secular media have been berating foreigners for having panicked at the prospect of a Welfare Party victory, leading Turkey into instability and chaos.

"This is completely unfounded and may well be regarded as an insult to Turks and their parliamentary democratic system," Ilnur Cevik, editor of the English-language Turkey Daily News, wrote yesterday.

But maybe these foreigners had just been listening to Mrs. Ciller, Turkey's formidable Iron Lady, who for months before the election had been sounding the alarm to the West of the new Red Peril, a.k.a. the Welfare Party.

"Let no one make any mistake that Turkey will remain an island of stability in this troubled region," Mr. Cevik pontificates in the same editorial.

Most Western nations are eagerly waiting for the secular parties to prove just that by wasting little time in forming a government with the will and ability to deal effectively with the mounting problems.

As they do so, they will surely be bearing in mind that, should they fail, the Welfare Party will be standing by, ready to reap the electoral benefit.