

Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a westward-looking Turk

WHEN the stubbornly modest Ahmet Necdet Sezer unexpectedly became Turkey's president six months ago, few Turks knew much about him, and even fewer took him very seriously. Now it looks as if this quietly principled man may play a decisive part in the argument between Turks who believe that their country should strive to join the European Union, and grow more democratic in the process, and those who think that this would require too big a change in the way Kemal Ataturk reckoned, 70-odd years ago, that Turkey ought to be governed.

Last week, sparks flew when the European Commission in Brussels brought out its annual report on the dozen-plus countries which want to join the Union, and once again, in a separate road map, said that Turkey should do more to improve its human-rights record. Most of Turkey's politicians made duly indignant noises. Its leftist but nationalist prime minister, Bulent Ecevit, accused the EU of trying to "trick" Turkey into accepting the reunification of Cyprus as a prerequisite for joining the EU. Devlet Bahçeli, an even more nationalist deputy prime minister, said the EU's implied demand that all Turks, including Kurdish ones, should be allowed to broadcast and to teach schoolchildren in their own language was "pernicious" and "unacceptable". True to form, a senior general stepped into the fray, saying "no one should doubt that we strongly embrace EU membership"—but only on conditions acceptable to Turkey.

So far the warmly pro-European President Sezer has held his fire. But if anybody can pull all sorts of Turks—secular-minded Kemalists, generals, businessmen, Kurdish nationalists, Islamists—into making the necessary changes, he is probably the man.

The issue will doubtless come up soon at a meeting of the country's National Security Council, where generals sit alongside politicians and usually tell them what to do. But Mr Sezer, who chairs the council, may now be in a position to tell the generals that they are not the final arbiters of the country's destiny. The opinion polls say that, for the first time in Turkey's 77 years as a republic, the president now wins more trust than the army, which has hitherto always topped the poll.

In many ways, the 59-year-old Mr Sezer is still something of an enigma. He has expressed no grand vision of Turkey's future. Nobody knows exactly what he thinks about the generals' role in politics. He speaks no foreign language. He has not yet allowed himself to be interviewed by a journalist. Indeed, it was almost by accident that he became president at all.

The son of a schoolteacher from the western province of Afyon, Mr Sezer had spent his entire career as a lawyer, and thought he had reached the pinnacle of his profession when he was made head of the country's Constitutional Court in 1998. But then Mr Ecevit failed to persuade parliament to amend the constitution to let the outgoing President Suleyman Demirel stay on for a second seven-year term in office. The main parties could not agree on which of their own top men should have the job. Mr Sezer

was the only person just about acceptable to everybody: and so he stepped, largely unknown, up to the presidential throne.

His speech at the opening of parliament last month, however, began to show where he stands. Mr Sezer called on parliament to enact wide-ranging constitutional and democratic reforms and to uphold the supremacy of law. Such changes should be carried out, he explained, "not because the European Union wants them but because these are changes that our people deserve."

His frequent commendations of secularism will have pleased the top brass, who sat listening to him. Western diplomats were reassured by his commitment both to Turkey's European vocation and to its alliance with the United States. But for most ordinary Turks it is Mr Sezer's aversion to pomp, and his manifest probity, that mark him off from many of his predecessors.

Since moving into the "Pink Palace" in Ankara's posh Cankaya district, Mr Sezer and his schoolteacher wife, Semra, have drastically cut the size of the presidential staff. Protocol has been reduced to a minimum. Mr Sezer has traded in the presidential coat and tails for a simple suit. His motorcade stops at traffic lights. When Selahattin Ozakin, an Ankara teacher, sent him a congratulatory fax in August, he heard Mr Sezer's voice on the telephone 20 minutes later, ringing to thank him. Now Mr Sezer plans to tour the Anatolian countryside by train, as Ataturk did some 70 years ago. He clearly wants to draw his strength not from the politicians who picked him but from the Turkish nation.

Those who thought the new president would confine himself to merely ceremonial duties have had a shock. Mr Sezer first proved he was no pliant pushover when in August he twice rejected a military-inspired decree, forwarded by Mr Ecevit, which would have enabled the government to sack thousands of civil servants deemed to be overly pious Muslims or too sympathetic to the restless Kurds. The generals are said to have been fuming ever since.

They will have been further irked by the presence of pro-Islamist journalists, for the first time in three years, at the annual Republic Day reception held by the president on October 29th. The prime minister has gone so far as to accuse Mr Sezer of hindering the government's campaign against militant Islamists. All this has made the president popular with religious politicians and the pro-Islamist press. Yet they should remember that it was Mr Sezer who signed the Constitutional Court's decision in 1998 that led to the banning of Turkey's largest pro-Islamic party.

Mr Ecevit is now threatening to push for legislation that would cut the presidential term from seven years to five. An unconcerned Mr Sezer says he is in favour of a modest presidency. He may lack the worldliness and the wiles of his predecessor, Mr Demirel, and the charisma of the late President Turgut Ozal. But he has six more years to make himself felt. And, so far, he has clearly shown that he is prepared to stand up for democratic values and the rule of law, whether or not the men in uniform like it.

