

What Comes After Turkey's Presidential Referendum?

Voters in Turkey head to the polls once again on April 16th, for yet another constitutional referendum, this time to decide whether or not to change their governmental system to a new “executive presidential system.” A ‘yes’ vote would fortify and legalize the power that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan already wields in the country and hand him even more authority.

The referendum proposes changing the government's structure to abolish the post of prime minister, allow the president much greater power to shape and select the judiciary, pass his own budgets, dissolve the parliament at will, retain his ties to a political party (allowing him to select party candidates), and serve two more five year terms (after the next election in 2019), among other things.

While Erdogan supporters claim these changes are necessary to ensure “stability” for Turkey, critics view the referendum as perhaps the final step in institutionalizing authoritarianism in Turkey. According to Ali Bayramoglu, April's vote may mark “one of the sharpest turns in [Turkey's] democratic and constitutional history”:

The draft contains all the elements that would move Turkey away from the core norms of a pluralist, democratic state of law — separation of powers and a system of checks and balances — and transform it into a majoritarian authoritarian system....

Drafted in line with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's wishes, the proposed new constitution concentrates power in the hands of a single individual and blurs the lines between the ruling party and the state. As such, it falls behind all of Turkey's previous constitutions, including the notorious 1982 constitution, the product of a military coup.¹

President Erdogan has spared no effort promoting the ‘yes’ vote, with all the resources of a largely controlled media behind him and his most charismatic critic (Selahattin Demirtas, leader of the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party or HDP) behind bars. He has likened ‘no’ voters to the June 15 coup plotters and terrorists,² once again increasing polarization in the country.

The referendum is really about Erdogan himself under such circumstances, and a ‘no’ vote risks precipitating a decline in political fortunes for what has heretofore appeared to be an unassailable leader. The stakes could not be higher for Mr. Erdogan, since losing his grip on Turkish politics, and particularly the parliamentary majority of his Justice and Development Party (AKP), could presage a string of parliamentary inquiries and investigations for corruption and other malfeasance by him, his family and many of his top ministers.

In this sense, while a ‘no’ vote in April would help protect Turkish democracy, it could also lead to greater instability in Turkey in the short to medium term. An insecure charismatic leader generally proves more dangerous and damaging to their country than a secure and confident one. Faced with the prospect of having to soon relinquish power, Mr. Erdogan could conceivably resort to riskier and riskier stratagems aimed at forestalling such an eventuality. Under such circumstances, the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) will also likely rage on for some time.

From the point of view of neighbors like the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, seeing President Erdogan remain firmly in power remains preferable to various uncertain alternatives. It was under Mr. Erdogan and the AKP's watch, after all, that relations between Ankara and Erbil blossomed both politically and economically. Apart from the pro-Kurdish HDP, other opposition parties in Turkey (the

Republican People's Party and especially the far-right National Movement Party) remain much more critical of warm relations with Erbil and the possible independence of Iraqi Kurdistan.

A possible 'yes' vote in April carries its own problems and risks, however. First of all, the Turkish economy is unlikely to fare well under increased authoritarianism. Authoritarian states and leaders tend to appropriate a greater and greater share of "their" economy's assets for themselves and their friends. Investors tend to steer clear of such states, given that one's business holdings can be seized with little notice and next to no recourse to weak institutions and non-existent rules of law. Talented entrepreneurs often emigrate from such places, given that political connections quickly become much more important than industry and merit. All the strongest economies in the world with the exception of China thus boast healthy democratic institutions, the rule of law and checks and balances to prevent such things. Meanwhile, states such as Russia, with some 146 million citizens, have economies roughly the size of Australia's (a country with only 23 million people).

A weak Turkish economy will also impact neighbors such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, via decreased Turkish investments and demand for oil and gas among other things. At the same time, if government proves stable in Turkey (albeit increasingly undemocratic), this may provide some countervailing influence to declining Western investments and economic innovation, especially if Arab Gulf states and Asian states make up the differences in investments (and tourism).

A leader in Ankara who faces virtually no checks or balances to his power may pursue a very unpredictable foreign policy, however. Iraqi citizens who lived under Saddam Hussein's regime may remember well what an unpredictable foreign policy can look like. If Mr. Erdogan and some of his top advisors truly harbor dreams of restoring past Ottoman glory, Turkey might attempt myriad regional gambits and interventions well beyond its current foray into Syria. Too many uncertainties affect how this might play out, beyond the greater potential for instability, new opportunities, new dangers and strife in the region.

The one thing that remains certain is that the April 16, 2017 referendum in Turkey offers a momentous turning point for the world's 17th largest economy, for good or for ill.

¹ Ali Bayramoglu, "Will presidential referendum kill Turkey's democracy?" *Al-Monitor*, January 23, 2017.

² Jared Malsin, "Turkey Is Not Convinced By Erdogan's Bid to Transform the Constitution," *Time*, February 21, 2017.