
The Referendum in Turkey: A Pyrrhic Victory and Continuous Crisis

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The narrow victory of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the referendum on 16 April does not guarantee a politically strong and trouble-free presidency. Reconciling domestic political calculations with the Kurdish issue and relations with the European Union between now and the next presidential elections in 2019 may prove even more challenging.

There is no doubt that the Turkish referendum of 16 April 2017 marks a sea change for Turkey's political system. Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) have narrowly won the referendum that turns his de facto hegemonic presidency into de jure. 51.28% of [Turkish citizens](#) approved the 18 proposed constitutional amendments, while 48.72% opposed them. However, the provisions of the constitutional amendments and the statements made by the main political protagonists and antagonists give little hope that the referendum result will bring political stability or economic prosperity; or allow Turkey's leadership to play a constructive role in Syria and Iraq - at least in the short-term. Furthermore, it is unlikely to enhance the level of cooperation with the EU and the US over the war against the Islamic State (IS) and the refugee crisis.

Constitutional Amendments, Results and Protagonists

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to engage with the details of the constitutional amendments, but it is important to highlight that the new presidential system is turning Turkey's political system into a de jure hegemonic presidency without the existence of effective checks and balances despite [assertions](#) to the contrary. Consequentially, this has raised the stakes for the anti-AKP supporters, increasing the overall levels of polarisation in Turkey.

Specifically, the main argument of the ['Yes' supporters](#) is that the president's accountability to the parliament and to the courts has been introduced for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic and therefore the criticism over a hegemonic presidency is unfounded. Indeed, [accountability for the president](#) is being introduced, but it is difficult to see how it can ever be implemented given that [article 105](#) provides a three stage procedure with high numbers of deputies required for each stage. First, an absolute majority of parliamentarians (301 out of 600) is needed to request the opening of an investigation, three fifths (360 out of 600) are required to open the investigation and two thirds (400 out of 600) of the vote are required for the impeachment. The applicability of this procedure is even harder to imagine when the president not only holds [sweeping executive functions](#), including the appointment of 12 out of 15 judges to the constitutional

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court, setting the state's budget, and deciding the National Security Council representatives (NSC), but he/she is allowed for the first time to assume the role of party leader, meaning directly influencing his/her parties' deputies over decisions regarding the presidency.

International organisations, such as the [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE) have announced their preliminary findings and conclusions about the referendum, with the OSCE crucially stating that "the 16 April constitutional referendum took place on an unlevel playing field and the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities." Furthermore, the main opposition, [the CHP party](#), questions the legality of Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK) to change the rule requiring each ballot to be stamped with a seal and claims that around 1.5 million ballots that were not stamped were cast and counted. These significant developments undermine the results of the referendum and thereby the unity of the country, especially in the main urban and financial centres, i.e. Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, where voters voted against the amendments.

In his first statements after the results' announcement, [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) dashed any hopes of reversing his highly controversial policies regarding the militarisation of the Kurdish issue and his polemic against the European Union. Specifically, he thanked the supporters of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and declared that the issue of reinstating the death penalty will be discussed with Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, and the leader of MHP, Devlet Bahçeli. Lastly, he rejected any possibility for a devolution of power by stressing "one nation, one flag, one country, one state". These statements are a strong indication that Erdogan's political agenda will continue to go hand in hand with that of MHP, whose leader, Devlet Bahçeli, will be consulted for its implementation. This means that no one can expect that Erdogan will change his rhetoric and his actions with regard to issues sensitive to the agenda of the ultra-nationalist MHP; at least not until the next presidential elections take place in 2019 or earlier.

Turkey's Role in Syria and Iraq

Accordingly, it cannot be expected that Turkey will change its policy towards Syria and Iraq dramatically. If anything, [Erdogan](#) will continue to prioritise the containment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and any affiliated organisations to it, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. In the case of Iraq, in particular, [Turkey](#) will step up its efforts to contain the role of the PKK in Sinjar, including the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) that are currently not enjoying the support of United States. This means that Turkey will be trying to put further pressure on Baghdad and Erbil to contribute towards that strategy. At the same time, Erdogan will continue to support the Turkmens in the case of Kirkuk also in accordance with MHP's pan-Turkic vision. However, this is not expected to weaken his close ties with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), although his stance can provoke a backlash from KDP's coalition partner in government, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), creating hurdles in Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Turkey's Relations with the EU, US and Russia

The relations that seem to be under imminent threat with major repercussions for the financial and political stability of Turkey are those with the European Union. The EU might have developed strong transactional relations with Turkey on the refugee crisis issue, but European officials, such as [Jean-Claude Juncker](#), have threatened Turkey with termination of its EU candidacy in case the death penalty is reinstated in the country. It is not easy to foresee how this relationship will evolve, but the divergence between the two partners over normative issues, such as the need for democratisation, good governance and respect for human rights is not a good indication for what is to follow.

The referendum in Turkey does not seem to negatively affect [Trump's position](#) towards the country for as long as Turkey does not undermine his strategic objective of uprooting IS from Syria in a short-period of time. This also includes the need for Turkey to remain militarily idle in Northern Syria and not move against the US's main local ally, the PYD, regardless of his polemical rhetoric.

Relations with Russia will continue to be based on close economic and energy cooperation, although Syria will continue to be the biggest challenge for their transactional relationship. If anything, Erdogan's hegemonic presidency is creating a political front with Putin's Russia against the liberal democracies of the European Union.

In conclusion, the narrow victory of Erdogan in the referendum does not guarantee a politically strong and trouble-free presidency. Erdogan will continue to be in need of MHP's support until the next presidential elections in 2019 with repercussions on his decision-making in both domestic and foreign policy issues.

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