



Turkey: Divided We Stand

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 446, April 18, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The referendum victory of April 16, 2017, which gave Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unchecked powers, has left Turkey bitterly polarized. Fresh rounds of political tensions are likely in a country where half the population loves the president and the other half hates him. Erdoğan's longer-term game plan is to ensure that Turkey will continue to elect conservative, nationalist presidents and governments after his day is done.

On April 16, 2017, nearly half of all voting Turks objected to a new constitutional order that grants Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unchecked powers in a "Turkish-style" executive presidency. At the ballot box, 51.4% of registered voters agreed to give Erdoğan what he so powerfully craved: legitimacy for the powers he has unconstitutionally exercised since he became Turkey's first directly elected president in August 2014. That result left 48.6% of Turks frustrated and isolated. Turkey's divide is now deeper and its politics more fragile, and the worsening political polarization promises turmoil.

With his new powers, Erdoğan will be able to further consolidate his rule. As head of the state, the government, and the ruling party, he can now appoint vice presidents, cabinet ministers, state bureaucrats, and senior judges. He can propose budgets and issue government decrees. All of this is now legitimate – although an opposition party is claiming election fraud. Its claim is based on a ruling by the Supreme Board of Elections that votes on papers without official seals are to be declared valid, a clear violation of Turkey's electoral laws.

Political co-habitation will be much harder now. Protests and the use of brutal police force, especially if vote-rigging claims become more serious allegations,

will not be unlikely. Erdoğan's promise to reinstate the death penalty will finally break the weakening chains keeping Turkey anchored at the European bay, a turn of events that will almost inevitably spark economic and financial chaos.

Ankara will have its hands full introducing a new constitutional regime without national consensus. Even the country's post-military coup constitution of 1982 won over 91% of voter support. A regime change so radical that it includes abolishing the office of prime minister and substantially weakening parliament based on the approval of only slightly more than half the population will not build nationwide political peace.

Was the vote on April 16 a success story for Erdoğan? It depends on the criteria. Erdoğan won almost exactly the same vote he won in the presidential election of August 2014 (51.5% vs. 51.4%). Not a bad score. But the president's Yes campaign was run (ironically) by two major parties: his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

In theory, the two parties should have won over 60% of the vote on April 16, as their combined vote in the November 1, 2015 parliamentary election was 61.4%. But the Yes campaign's 51.4% was 10 percentage points lower than the combined vote for the two parties, suggesting that even some AKP and/or MHP voters opposed changing the country's political regime to favor a disproportionately powerful president.

Can Erdoğan comfortably rule a country of 80 million people with the support of slightly over half the population? The answer is yes and no.

Erdoğan has often protested that he did not advocate an executive presidential system "for his own sake and benefit." He reminded his fans at rallies that "he is merely a mortal" and the system he wanted would remain in place long after his death. But did he want to install the system in order to ensure his own one-man rule until his death? Again, the answer is yes and no.

Erdoğan certainly wanted expanded powers for himself, but he also wanted them in the interests of political Islam. In his ideal world, he would be a powerful president for life – and after his death, he would be succeeded by another Islamist (likely chosen by Erdoğan himself). The new system would thus further advance political Islam in Turkey and the Middle East.

The story behind the presidential system goes back to June 7, 2015, another occasion on which the Turks went to the ballot box. Although his doing so was

totally illegitimate, President Erdoğan, who was supposed to be non-partisan, campaigned for the AKP. With slightly over 40% of the nationwide vote, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since it rose to power in 2002.

Then-prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had to negotiate a coalition government with opposition parties, including the Islamists' archenemy, the secular Republican People's Party (CHP). Erdoğan objected to this idea and set new elections for November 1, 2015. On that occasion, his AKP won a landslide victory, garnering nearly 50% of the vote and forming a single-party government.

Despite the happy ending for Erdoğan and his Islamist cohort, the June 7 episode deeply worried his strategists. The possibility of another Turkish popular vote forcing a coalition alliance with a secular party had to be eliminated. The only way to do that was to change the presidential system.

Under the new system, smaller parties will be gradually made irrelevant (as they are in the US), leaving two major actors on the stage: an Islamist/nationalist party addressing Turkey's less educated, conservative masses; and a secular, liberal party representing better-educated and more urban Turks. Turkey's conservative/secular divide typically gives the former group 70-75% of nationwide support and the latter the remaining 25-30%. Such a political set-up would make the election of a secular government and president highly unlikely and a coalition government out of the question.

This, of course, is a political gamble, although the odds are against any conservative defeat in Turkish politics. In theory, a new secular candidate could emerge one day who would appeal to both conservative and secular voters, or an economic crisis might substantially diminish the popularity of a conservative president. If power then moves from the Islamists to the secularists, the system could launch a process of undoing Erdoğan's Islamization.

Erdoğan, or one of his conservative successors, might come to regret the April 16 referendum if it means eventually granting super-executive powers to an anti-Islamist president.

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