

# Today's referendum is the most critical vote in modern Turkish history

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Today, Turkey is holding a referendum on whether to approve constitutional amendments that would substantially increase the power of the country's President. [Soli Özel](#) and [Sezin Öney](#) write that the result is bound to transform the country in one way or another, and that a Yes vote would effectively consign Turkey's century old parliamentary system to history.



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Today the Turkish electorate will once again spend a Sunday at the polls, in what will be the fifth major vote since March 2014. The referendum to decide the fate of a package of constitutional amendments is one of the most critical moments in Turkey's history. Arguably, this is the most critical vote ever in the Republic's history. Nothing short of the nature of the Turkish political system and the current regime is at stake. If the process ultimately ends with a Yes vote, there will be a systemic switch to a fully-fledged executive presidency and Turkey's century old parliamentary system will be consigned to history.

The current constitution was written by the military junta that staged a coup in 1980 and was accepted by an overwhelming majority in 1982. It has already been amended three times by popular vote and fifteen times through

legislative action since then. But this time, the proposed changes are sweeping. They basically create a system referred to by its creators as a “Turkish style presidency” that places all the political power in the hands of the executive represented by the President. Although the parliament would continue to exist, it would no longer be the central institution in the political system.

With such a demotion, the role, functions and powers of political parties will also be considerably reduced. The President would have the power to dissolve the parliament anytime he wishes and the parliament would have no power to exert checks and balances over the President. The post of the Prime Minister will be abolished, the cabinet will be selected by the President, and his appointees will not need the consent of the Parliament. The President will be allowed to issue decrees as the sole head of the executive branch. He will also have broad powers over judicial appointments and he himself will have no criminal liability.

In other words, if the Yes camp emerges as the winner today, the Turkish public will have sided with a regrettable combination. The 1982 Constitution will still retain its draconian, freedom restricting spirit and articles. But the latest modifications, in turn, will let the President have the first and last say on everything, with no checks and balances. There will be no possibility of holding him accountable for his acts and decisions.

The amendments are tailor-made for one man; the current Head of the Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Various leaders on the Turkish right have expressed their wish to endorse a Presidential system in the past. Erdoğan joined them in 2003, when he first became Prime Minister. The ideological spirit behind the amendments embodies a notably populist line of thinking: the President, as he will be chosen by popular vote, will be representing the will of the majority. Hence, he cannot do wrong and cannot be held accountable because he *is* the very incarnation of the people.

### **A surprise result?**

Since 2010, Turkey had gone through three general elections, one presidential election, one municipal election, and, including today's vote, two referendums. All but one of these ballots helped the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to consolidate its power and monopolise the political arena as the ruling party.

The 7 June 2015 general election was the only exception to this trend; then, the AKP's votes were reduced to 40.9 per cent and the party was unable to form a single party government for the first time since its ascendancy to power in 2002. Nevertheless, the political mastery of Erdoğan helped the party reject that electoral verdict. His wish that the elections be repeated was fulfilled when the country went back to the polls on 1 November 2015 after a wave of terrorist incidents shook the country to its core. The violence of the interval between the two elections propelled the AKP's vote share to 49%. The party was alone at the helm again.

Prior to the November elections, the electorate hid their preferences and the polls showed no indication that the result would be any different from the previous election. Yet there was a dramatic shift towards the AKP mainly because of an upsurge in the number of terrorist attacks during the intervening months. Prior to the referendum, it is extremely difficult to forecast the results of the vote. Turkey has been under a state of emergency rule for almost 10 months, declared within days of the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. The pollsters point out that the reply rates to questionnaires have fallen below 25-30 per cent, down from the customary 50 per cent.

Current polls suggest an almost 50-50 divide between the Yes and No camps. Metropoll, one of the most reputable polling companies, gave a 52 per cent share for Yes against 48 per cent for No at the beginning of April. When they repeated the poll earlier this week, the results were similar, with 52.5 per cent for Yes and 47.5 per cent for No. The No camp had the edge during January and February, but from the beginning of March the Yes campaign appears to have gained the upper hand as the nationalistic tone of its campaign has become amplified.

In March, the country's political crisis with the Netherlands over the expulsion of the AKP's Family and Social Affairs Minister, Fatma Betül Şahin, coincided with an upturn in Yes support. Şahin's victimhood as a 'conservative woman

being expelled by the Dutch police' was utilised as a popular theme through mainstream and social media. President Erdoğan himself also started to emphasise the idea that the referendum consists of a "clash between the Crescent and the Cross". Today's vote has even been portrayed by some figures as a symbolic gesture "to halt the new Crusades".

### **Will the vote be fair?**

Nearly the entire state apparatus, including the governors and segments of the national and local bureaucracy, were at the service of the Yes camp during the campaign. The pro-government media have been thoroughly mobilised to support the Yes campaign and the mainstream media, with very few exceptions, have proven to be timid in their coverage. The advocates of the No campaign have faced more than 200 documented attacks; including violent ones. Supporting a No vote has been depicted as supporting "terrorism" by the top names of the cabinet, including President Erdoğan.

All in all, openly declaring support for a No vote required courage. One thing is clear though: faced with myriad obstacles, waves of intimidation and frequent harassment, the no camp has proven to be resilient. We will only know tonight how successful they have actually been when the curtain draws on Election Day. And we will also discover how many of those who publicly declared their support for Yes were actually 'shy No' voters.

The Limited Referendum Observation Mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR LROM) released an [interim report](#) on Turkey's referendum on 7 April, verifying that "the campaign is characterised by polarisation and some restrictions". The report declared that "the fact a number of political leaders and activists remain behind bars has seriously curtailed some groups' ability to campaign. As of now, in several cases, 'No' supporters have faced police interventions while campaigning; a number were also arrested on charges of insulting the President or organising unlawful public events".

In this climate, the Yes vote clearly has had the upper hand. And response bias may have worked in its favour as well, since voters are simply afraid of being marked as "terrorists", particularly in small districts where votes cannot remain anonymous. Yet, the fact that the contest is a dead heat at this stage speaks to a potent force of resistance and discontent in the country, which just might prevail when the votes are finally counted. An additional factor in favour of No is that there is no imminent danger that the AKP will lose its political hegemony if it loses the referendum. Voting No is simply voting against a particularly radical change to the political system, but not against the party or against the President, who remains very popular.

This referendum will not change the political power balance in Turkey. President Erdoğan has his mandate until 2019 and the next general election is not due until the same year, although nobody expects either the President or the Parliament to serve their full terms. Whether the referendum ends in a Yes or No, early elections are in the offing. Yet a No vote will indicate vulnerability and weakness on his part and highlight cracks that already exist within the AKP, where many previously powerful figures are looking for an opportunity to return. Such an outcome may also open some space for other centre-right cum nationalist politicians to try their hand.

When all else fails for the analysts of Turkish politics, and reaching a conclusion proves elusive, one can always fall back on the common sense and wisdom of the electorate. Tonight, we will all find out where that wisdom lies.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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