

Turkish constitutional referendum preview: A polarised society at a crossroads

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Turkey will hold a key referendum on 16 April over constitutional amendments that would substantially increase the power of the country's President. [Ilke Toygür](#) previews the vote, writing that the outcome remains difficult to predict, with polls showing a tight race and many voters still undecided.



Ballot paper for the referendum, Credit: [BirGün Gazetes](#)

While the final countdown for the Turkish constitutional referendum is almost over, the result and its implications are far from clear. The referendum is a neck and neck race, with a large number of undecided voters – more than 10 per cent according to the polls – ensuring neither camp will be able to relax until the very last minute. In the meantime, there have been numerous discussions related to the campaign itself, notably over how “free” and “fair” it has been as it has taken place under the state of emergency put in place following last July's [failed coup attempt](#).

The constitutional background

The current constitution of the Turkish Republic, which was prepared after the military coup of 1980 – and amended many times afterwards – assigns the President a symbolic and non-partisan role. Since the election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as President in 2014, for the first time with direct elections, the limitations of this role have been pushed to the extremes. Turkey has been governed by a de facto Presidency, with many unorthodox moves by the President being pushed through.

Some scholars [already term](#) Turkey a “competitive authoritarian regime” given its current status. According to this definition, there are regular elections and there is a possibility of government change. However, the competition

does not take place under “free” and “fair” processes, the opposition has a very limited capacity to use the media, the government has access to state resources and it holds the power to assign various punishments – even jail time – to important opposition figures. This inequality creates a vital difference between a liberal democracy and the kind of regime that exists in Turkey. If you also factor in the concept of “post-truth politics”, the situation gets even more complicated.

In the case of this referendum, 18 amendments are being proposed which would establish an executive presidency, while eliminating the office of the Prime Minister, without the necessary mechanisms of “checks and balances”. The fundamental principles of the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary are at stake, since the amendments give **unbalanced powers** to the elected President. There have been various concerns raised in relation to the amendments, since they have not emerged from consensus between all sides of the political spectrum and society.

How big is the social desirability bias?

Since the polls are not providing a clear indication of the result, there are various questions on the table. There is the issue of which side undecided voters will ultimately choose to back, as well as the problem of respondents to polls potentially not indicating their real views for a variety of reasons. The latter problem is often produced by ‘social desirability bias’: the tendency of poll respondents to answer questions in ways that they believe will be viewed more favourably by other people in society. The likelihood of this type of bias existing in the case of the referendum makes it extremely difficult to get a clear picture of the actual voting intentions of Turkish citizens.

The key question here is the extent to which social desirability bias is evident in the polling, and how this might be obscuring the likely result of the referendum. There are various academic discussions related to the validity of polls in referendums in general, with the recent examples of Brexit and the peace referendum in Colombia. Turkey is unlikely to be an exception and we will only have a clear picture once the votes are counted.

What if the result is “Evet” (Yes)?

If the result of the referendum is a Yes vote, it will be the most significant institutional change since the establishment of the Turkish republic. There will be a transition period until 2019, when there will be both parliamentary and presidential elections. Afterwards, the country will be governed by an all-powerful President. The Venice Commission, a commission of the Council of Europe – to which Turkey is also a member – has **warned** in its published opinion on the amendments to the constitution that this would be “a dangerous step backwards in the constitutional democratic tradition of Turkey”.

Some analysts have even posed the question as to whether this will mean Turkey is no longer complying with the Copenhagen criteria, putting its EU candidacy process in danger. Even if no dramatic gesture is expected until after the German elections in September, there will be strong criticism, especially from the European Parliament – which has already voted in favour of a non-binding decision to freeze the accession negotiations with Turkey.

What if the result is “Hayir” (No)?

In contrast, if the referendum produces a No vote, this would constitute a major failure for the government, rivalling the result of the June 2015 election when Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost its parliamentary majority. And the aftermath of such a defeat would produce existential discussions related to the future of the AKP and the country itself.

The option of a snap election would be on the table as well, depending on the nature of the result of the referendum, even if the electorate is becoming tired of electoral tests. It is also expected that the state of emergency will be extended once again. Since a No vote would entail returning to the status-quo, which already has many existential problems, the country would need to refocus on its internal affairs to find solutions to these challenges.

Issues beyond the Yes/No dichotomy

Even if the referendum produces a Yes vote, it is doubtful whether the public are genuinely convinced that the proposed system is the best one for Turkey. Much of the Yes support is linked to party loyalty, both to the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is also backing a Yes vote. The ballot paper (shown above) does not even include the actual referendum question, just the words “Evet” and “Hayir”: it is essentially a contest between two very divided and polarised camps over the personality of Erdoğan himself.

The level of polarisation in the country is now higher than ever, making the public both tense and open to manipulation. Indeed, the situation violates one of the main principles of a new constitution: consensus. Since the very beginning of this process, there has been a lack of consensus among political parties. Even though the need for constitutional change is acknowledged by all sides, the scope and limits of this change remain highly contentious. The referendum has become an extremely personal contest focused on who should govern Turkey, when the real question in constitutional reform should be ‘how should Turkey be governed?’

Another significant issue is the inequality between the two campaigns. A [recent report](#) from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) emphasises this point. It highlights that the necessary conditions for a democratic process are not linked to voting alone, but that “free” and “fair” campaigning are also key for a democratic outcome. It is hard to comply with this standard when the country remains under a state of emergency. This situation forms the backdrop to the referendum and will no doubt prompt questions about the legitimacy of the result.

Turkey is undoubtedly at a crossroads and the referendum will define the path to its future. The country has experienced complicated times in the lead up to the vote and society is extremely polarised, making it hard to reach a consensus on any issue, let alone consensus on a topic as important as constitutional change. Whatever the result of the referendum is, the country needs a more democratic form of governance – one that can provide equal opportunities to all its citizens, regardless of their background.

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

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