

# COMMENTARY

No.426

Monday, 5 June 2017

## **Turkish Referendum: Will it lead to autocratic rule?**

**Md. Muddassir Quamar**

**Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi**

The result of the April 16 referendum in Turkey on the constitutional amendment bill proposing to change the current parliamentary form of government to a presidential system has not thrown a surprise. As expected, the pro-change side gained more votes, though its margin of victory was lower than expected. Though the official result has not been announced yet, according to the state-owned Anadolu Agency, the ‘Yes’ side led by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its ally the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) received 51.41 per cent of the votes cast, while the ‘No’ side backed by the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) received 48.59 per cent. Interestingly, if only domestic votes are counted, the ‘Yes’ vote falls to 51.18 per cent, indicating that it received overwhelming support among diaspora voters. Some parts of Turkey witnessed protests after the results became clear, even as ‘Yes’ supporters celebrated their victory on the streets of Ankara and other cities.

President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım have claimed victory and termed the result of the referendum as historical, while the opposition CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has alleged rigging of votes and demanded the annulment of the referendum. The last-minute decision of the Supreme Electoral Council (YSK) to consider unstamped ballots as legitimate has come in for severe criticism and raised doubts about possible rigging of votes in favour of the ‘Yes’ side. The opposition has alleged that 1.5 million unstamped ballots have been counted, which is significant given the low victory margin of 1.38 million votes. International observers, especially from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), have termed

the referendum as unfair since the opposition did not have a level playing field. Such criticisms gain credence because the referendum was conducted under emergency rule and a growing crackdown on opposition leaders and journalists as well as continued purges in the bureaucracy, judiciary and military after the July 2016 coup attempt.

Here, it is necessary to recall that the controversial constitutional amendment bill, passed by parliament earlier this year, has faced serious criticism and opposition from a cross-section of the Turkish population. Those opposed to the amendment see it as a bid by Erdoğan to prolong his stay in power and gain lifetime immunity on corruption investigations. Further criticism has come from intellectuals and liberals who argue that the new system vests extraordinary powers in one individual, thus raising the chances of an autocratic dictatorship. The president under the new system will not only be the head of state and head of government but will have the power to appoint and dismiss all higher officials as well as the power to nominate judges. In addition, the president will also have the power to issue decrees with the effect of law in social and economic areas, although parliament will have the power to override these decrees.

Another significant provision that has come in for criticism is that the president can not only maintain links with a political party but can also be its leader. This will change the longstanding tradition of Turkish presidents being the symbol of neutrality and national unity. The Turkish parliament under the amendment will lose some powers but will still have the authority to annul presidential decrees. However, the possibility of one party gaining parliamentary majority with its leader as president is what has alarmed the opposition as well as international observers. For instance, if Erdoğan who gave up the leadership of AKP after becoming president in 2014 decides, as widely speculated, to return as leader of that party and gets elected as president in the next election due in 2019, and if the AKP were to simultaneously regain a majority in parliament, then it will effectively put him at the helm of the state, the government, the ruling party, and practically in control of parliament. Thus, the possibility of an unfettered one-man dictatorship, as feared by the opposition and intellectuals and perhaps desired by Erdoğan himself, cannot be completely ruled out.

The post-referendum changes in Turkey will have far reaching implications not only for the form of government but also for the long-term future of the republic and adversely affect democratic consolidation. Turkey, which until a few years ago was lauded for effecting a successful marriage between Islamism and democracy and upheld as a 'model' for the Muslim world, has witnessed a slide since mid-2013 when then Prime Minister Erdoğan, acting tough on the Gezi Park protestors, decided to crackdown on the opposition, intellectuals and journalists questioning decisions of the AKP government. The situation has not improved since and Turkey has been courting one or the other controversy due to rash government decisions. The July 2016 coup provided the license for the AKP to take action against anyone questioning the government's decisions or motives and purges have since continued. The three-month state-of-emergency that

was imposed soon after the attempted coup has been extended thrice, the latest with effect from April 19. The Kurdish problem has re-emerged after the break down of peace negotiations with the militant Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the revival of a civil war like situation in the Kurd-dominated south-eastern province. Moreover, Turkey's Syria policy has come in for scathing criticism both internally and externally while its relations with Europe is at an all-time low.

Turkey has witnessed sharp political divisions in the run up to the referendum and Turkish society appears deeply divided. A large section of the people do not support the constitutional amendment, although a majority, as visible from the referendum results, supports the presidential form of government and expects it to bring stability and better governance as propagated by the AKP. Nonetheless, given the sharp divisions and the narrow margin of victory, the AKP will do well to ponder upon its policy choices and actions against the spectrum of opposition leaders and intellectuals and work towards national reconciliation. However, the lure of power might prove to be too strong for Erdoğan and this, if backed by popular support, which he currently enjoys, may push Turkey further towards autocracy.

**Note:** This article was originally published in *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)* on 20 April 2017. Web Link: [http://idsa.in/idsacomments/turkish-referendum-will-it-lead-to-autocratic-rule\\_mmquamar\\_200417](http://idsa.in/idsacomments/turkish-referendum-will-it-lead-to-autocratic-rule_mmquamar_200417)

**Md. Muddassir Quamar is a Associate Fellow with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. Email: [muddassir.2005@gmail.com](mailto:muddassir.2005@gmail.com)**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**