

# COMMENTARY

No.432

Wednesday, 14 June 2017

## **A Sad Day for Turkey**

**Alon Ben-Meir**

**New York University**

The razor-thin victory (51.3 per cent to 48.7 per cent) of Turkey's President Erdogan in the referendum held on April 16 in fact denies Erdogan the mandate to govern with the sweeping powers the new constitution grants the President, especially when the results of the referendum are seriously contested. Even if there was no outright fraud or irregularities in the votes (which by all accounts were rampant), the conditions under which the referendum was held made a mockery of free and fair elections. Given Erdogan's domestic and foreign policy conduct leading up to the referendum, the US and the EU must now seriously re-evaluate Turkey's role in NATO, its viability as an ally in the fight against ISIS, and its trustworthiness under the presidency of Erdogan.

There are at least 25 factors that delegitimize the referendum and its results, and once implemented, the repercussions on Turkey's future will be dire and essentially seal the fate of the country's prospective democracy:

1. The referendum was held under a state of emergency, in place since the July 2016 coup;
2. The referendum followed a purge, spreading fear and anxiety throughout the country;
3. The referendum was held under strict security conditions due to acts of terror by the PKK and ISIS;
4. Opposition members were intimidated, many of whom were imprisoned, shot, or beaten;
5. Concerns over personal safety inhibited the expression of a plurality of views;
6. Millions of Turks believe the referendum codifies Turkey as a dictatorship;
7. Many instances of voter fraud appeared to be captured on camera;
8. The new constitution inflicts a death blow to checks and balances in exercising power;

9. The “Yes” campaign received far greater media coverage than its opponents;
10. Professional associations were not allowed to hold campaign events to promote “NO”;
11. Top officials distorted campaign narratives equating the “NO” supporters to terrorists;
12. Erdogan falsely portrayed the referendum as the people’s choice in order to consolidate power;
13. The razor-thin victory strongly suggests that Erdogan has no mandate to rule;
14. Nearly 1 million ballots that were not stamped were considered valid;
15. Referendum shows that a cult of personality has become the new governing principle;
16. Erdogan skilfully used foreign foes and conspiracy theories to rally his Islamic base;
17. Domestic and international observers voiced serious doubts about legality of the process;
18. Voters were forced to vote on 18 amendments affecting 72 articles in a single package;
19. Voters weren’t provided with impartial information to make an informed choice;
20. The electoral board lacked transparency, whose sessions were closed to the public;
21. The arrest of over 100 journalists under emergency laws prohibited free expression;
22. A total of 158 media outlets were closed, including newspapers, TV, and radio stations;
23. Prior to the referendum, more than 1,500 civil society organizations were dissolved;
24. The freedom of assembly and association were restricted under the state of emergency;
25. Many Turks who fled the country out of fear were unable to vote.

Most observers from inside and outside the country predict that the referendum and its result will lead to greater polarization of the country. The fact that the new social contract is now based on an extremely fragile social, political, and economic foundation is bound to backfire. Given that a significant segment of the population believes that the referendum was stolen, it lacks legitimacy. It will be extremely difficult for Erdogan to embark on a substantial economic development program without overwhelming public support; this will likely spell further economic stagnation.

The powers bestowed on Erdogan will allow him to continue with his purge, and instead of reaching out to the opposition he will more than likely crush it. In his determination to consolidate his absolute powers, he will have to resort to increased repression and rule by decree, which will certainly instigate further street protests and over time widespread unrest.

Under such a constitution, Turkey will further distance itself from Western values, which will have a serious adverse impact on its prospect of joining the EU. Moreover, Erdogan’s statement, immediately after the result of the referendum, that he would reinstate the death penalty, will effectively end accession talks with the EU.

Erdogan will drive with even greater speed the Islamization of the nation, as he remains unwavering in his objective to make Turkey the leading Sunni Muslim state, which will further

alienate the Arab countries who view Turkey with suspicion and are concerned over Erdogan's ambition and his meddling in Arab affairs.

The judiciary will become increasingly arbitrary, and political plurality will remain in name only. Indeed, rather than bringing the country together, the referendum will widen the gap between the population and the ruling party. Moreover, the academic community will be further estranged from the political process.

Finally, whether or not the West admits it, the referendum raises serious questions about Turkey's commitment to NATO and its importance as an ally. Erdogan has shown time and again that he is untrustworthy in the way he is dealing with Western powers. His repeated threats to flood Europe with refugees unless he gets his way, and his challenge to the US to stop aiding its ally, the Syrian Kurds (the YPG)—whom he views as terrorists assisting the PKK in their battle against his government—must simply be rejected.

Even though Turkey has major strategic value to the West, the US and the EU should stop sugar coating their relations with Erdogan. Now that he has accomplished his goal, he must understand that he can no longer have it both ways. Reassessment of the ties between the two sides is overdue, taking into full consideration that Erdogan is not and is unlikely to become a friend of the West.

To be sure, it is a sad day for the Turkish people, who are witnessing with fear and deep trepidation how their dream of living in an enlightened, progressive, and secular country is dissolving in front of their eyes.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/sad-day-turkey/>

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

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