

Turkey, post-referendum - The new constitution legitimises the powers which Erdogan previously used

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Turkish Journalists, among others, have been subject to persistent repression.

The referendum vote on April 2017 approved the proposed constitutional amendments put forward by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) and President Erdogan, moving Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government. The result was not unexpected, argues Dario Navaro.

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Journalist Amberin Zaman in one of her articles prior to the referendum vote had posed the rhetorical question: was there any likelihood of the No vote winning? She believed it would be naive to expect such an outcome and added “would Erdogan have gone to a referendum if there was any risk of losing it?”

Nonetheless, the narrow majority by which the amendments went through, given the exceedingly uneven playing field during the referendum campaign, revealed that Erdogan’s hold on the country was not unassailable. In the period leading to the referendum, the state of emergency declared in the wake of the attempted coup was used to impede the meetings of the No-camp, while the JDP had state institutions and the state media at its disposal, which it used unreservedly to prop up its campaign. The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) was additionally disadvantaged by the fact that its leaders, as well as many of the party’s elected assembly members and councillors, were imprisoned and the party given scant air time on state media.

Despite the obstacles facing the No-camp, if not a united-front, an informal electoral common front developed which included the main opposition party, the Republican Peoples’ Party (RPP), the PDP, and members of the ultra-nationalist party who were not impressed with their leadership’s sudden turn to support of the JDP. Possibly some traditional JDP voters, who may have read in the silence of some of their party’s founding members a disapproval of the proposed constitutional changes, may even not have voted in favour.

The changes to the constitution will concentrate all state powers in the hands of the Presidency. The Prime Minister function will not exist; executive powers will be in the hand of the President. The President will appoint most the Supreme Constitutional Court judges and other high judges in the Judiciary. As the President can also be the leader of a party this means that he or she can heavily affect the composition of the legislature.

These changes however must be viewed in the proper perspective. Erdogan was already exercising these powers to a considerable degree. Not only the Western press, but also the opposition in Turkey view him as an “autocrat,” “sultan,” “dictator,” etc. The cleansing of the state apparatus of non-partisan civil servants, the control of the universities, the judiciary and the executive had been taking place even before the establishment of the state of emergency.

What Erdogan could previously do with Presidential directives is now done by decrees. The new constitution legitimises the powers which Erdogan previously used despite the constitution, and it gives him the opportunity to stay as President until 2029. The one thing the new constitution does not attempt to do is address the regime crisis – but then this was not the objective of the referendum.

The Regime Crisis

The crisis of the regime can be seen in the consistent failure of the JDP and Erdogan to govern the country through the rule of law. This crisis has been intensifying in recent years as seen in the totally disproportionate violent response by the police to the 2013 Gezi protests and by the corruption and bribery allegations scandal that same year that resulted in the resignation of four ministers – and was stopped in its tracks by the removal of the police chief and arrest warrants raised against the prosecutors of the case. In 2014, there was the unearthing of clandestine heavy weapons munitions being transported to organisations in Syria. The prosecution of the case was again halted by the arrest of the Chief Prosecutor and the regional military officers that had intercepted the trucks. Many of the journalists from the newspaper Cumhuriyet (Republic) that reported the event have since been arrested and are facing trial.

In 2015, the peace process with the Kurdish freedom movement was scuppered by Erdogan although he was the one that initiated this process himself. Subsequent military operations to silence the demands for local autonomy in Kurdish towns since have taken a very high toll on the civilian population, with forced large scale migrations of residents and the demolition of their homes. The acrimonious break with the Gülen movement that had been the strongest ally of the JDP during its rise to power also pointed to a crisis within the power block.

But the event that overshadowed all these incidents was the failed military coup of July 2016. The coup attempt was overpowered, but the draconian measures the government has resorted to since then have led to the cleansing of the state apparatus and state institutions on a scale never seen before in the history of the Republic, with tens of thousands of employees arbitrarily dismissed, labelled as terrorists and often arrested.

Political crises rarely have a clearly defined beginning or an end, just cycles that are of shorter or longer durations, but if one was pressed to distinguish the current regime crisis in Turkey, its beginnings can be traced to the military coup of 1980.

This coup differed from previous ones in three key aspects. Firstly, when the military junta took power it already had a clearly outlined neoliberal economic program to implement –this had been announced in January of the same year. Secondly, measures were taken to initiate an ideological shift from the traditional Kemalist state ideology to a blend of Turkish Nationalism with political Islam, the so-called Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, a political doctrine that some analysts trace back to Sultan Abdulhamit, but which was cultivated mainly during the 1970s. Thirdly, the outlawing of the two traditional parties of the ruling class – who had governed Turkey since it moved to a two-party political system in 1946 – resulted in recurrent governmental crises; allowing political Islam to become a major political player.

The economic and banking crisis of 2001-2 caused a major currency devaluation, sharp fall in the GNP and incomes per capita and set the scene for the JDP, led by Erdogan, to take the leading role on the political stage, which it has maintained in an uninterrupted fashion since.

Erdoganism

There is today, broadly speaking, a high degree of agreement about how to characterise the regime. Typical descriptions one can read in the British press as well as the limited Turkish opposition media (mainly social media) refer to it as tyranny, authoritarianism, autocracy, plebiscitary despotism, one-man rule, dictatorship, neo-fascism, etc., etc. Most of these terms are relevant, but they tend to portray the regime as an entrenched totalitarian state, which may be crediting Erdogan and the JDP with a high degree of invulnerability which is not necessarily the case.

We considered the Kemalist regime of the 1920s and 30s as Bonapartist, balancing as it was between the military-bureaucratic elites and the newly aspiring bourgeoisie on the one hand, and the provincial notables, large landowners and feudal landlords on the other. Today the regime stands firmly on both sections of big capital: the established western facing comprador capitalists and the emergent conservative "Anatolian Tigers." That is its strength.

Its popular base is the Anatolian new lower-middle- and middle-classes that have grown steadily since the 1980s, the conservative small and large landowners and the peasantry. At the same time, the class composition of Turkey has changed in line with those of modern economies. According to a recent census, 61% of the population are recognised as labourers, concentrated mainly in large cities. They represents a potential source of political instability for political Islam as its popularity could rapidly erode under conditions of an economic crisis that impacts the working class.

If building a one-man rule based on the support of half of the voting population is already a problem for the regime, the prospect of losing support in the metropolises is doubly so. The loss of the largest city Istanbul and the capital Ankara to the No-camp will have raised alarm bells for the JDP. If all the patriotic ranting against the West, the military offensive against the Kurds of Syria, the national flag waving policy accompanied with the slogan of "one-nation, one motherland, one flag", not to mention the threats to one's existence in this life as well as the afterlife, could barely maintain the regime's electoral base, what else can the regime do to prop up its support, and win the forthcoming elections of 2019?

Here a distinguishing aspect of Erdogan's Bonapartist regime must be borne in mind; its ability to use the religious card, to appeal to the pious, with legends of the Ottomans and the grandeur of the Empire that is now once again within the reach of Turkey. I think this factor, the constant references to a glorious era lost because of the Republic's secularism but which may be regained under Erdogan's personal leadership, warrants that the regime be labelled Erdoganism.

We have mentioned some of the inherent difficulties the regime faces, due partly to the evolving class structure of the country and partly to the extended duration of the crisis. This however does not imply in any way that No-block is in a strong position to challenge the regime. On the contrary, the weakness of the opposition and its inability (even unwillingness) to construct a credible alternative to the current regime is possibly the regime's major strength. Most of the No voters are represented by the RPP which appears to be quite content with its role as the main opposition party. The RPP colluded with the JDP in the removal of parliamentary immunity for assembly members which was clearly aimed at the HDP, and its leadership avoids the HDP like the plague, petrified of being associated with the Kurdish cause. The dissenters from the ultra-nationalist party, whether they decide to split or return to the fold, are unlikely to become part of a democratic opposition. As

for the HDP, its electoral capacity reached its zenith during the general elections of 2015 when it polled just over 10%, mainly based on its strength in Kurdish constituencies. The Turkish left, although it worked hard for a no vote, remains marginal as a social force and divided on the Kurdish question.

The ideas put forward by the left after the referendum are mainly for extra-parliamentary forms of organisations, such as the continuation of the “no-assemblies” formed in the metropolises, the creation of local and national “constitutional assemblies”, or the creation of an “action programme” to extend the No-block. The weakness of the trade-union movement, which only represents a small percentage of the active work force but is also split in three separate confederations, not to mention fault lines based on ethnic, nationalist and religious differences, is another barrier to creating a mass democratic opposition today.

How the crisis will be resolved remains an open question. Will the JDP splinter as the crisis becomes intolerable for larger and larger sections of the population, or will it attempt to pre-empt such a development by taking the country further in the direction of Islamisation, perhaps to an Islamic republic? It is argued that, in line with its early declarations prior to gaining power, the JDP will carry their supremacy to its logical conclusion by dispensing with secularism altogether and adopt sharia law. Those who dispute this reasoning contend that such a step would prove unattractive and unwarranted to the ruling classes and elites of Turkey given the significant economic and military ties with the West. What is quite clear though is that the regime’s declared policy to create a pious youth, the curtailment of academic and press freedoms, the de-secularisation of security forces, are all factors that bode ill for a secular democratic republic. They point to the prospect that it will be the Islamic pole of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis that is set to dominate the decade ahead.

This eventuality gives urgency to the need for the opposition to find effective ways to organise across a broad front, and indicates that secularism could be an important unifying thread, together with the demand for democracy, for tomorrow’s No-camp.

Dario Navaro, 12/5/2017

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/turkey-post-referendum/10126>