

Struggle for the No, Referendum in Turkey: Just the Beginning

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Whatever happens tomorrow, the Left is in a better position than ever to challenge Erdoğan's fragmented regime.

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Only a few days are left before Turkey's April 16th constitutional referendum on the transition to an authoritarian presidential system. Those who thought that the referendum would be an easy win for the government given the countrywide state of emergency have been proven wrong. The vivacity of the different "No" campaigns, in the face of the state's heavy-handed tactics, is a considerable source of hope for all forces of social opposition, regardless of the eventual outcome of the referendum. In the little time that remains, we must not only strive to increase the "No" votes, but also initiate a debate on our strategy for the post-referendum period so that we are not once again caught unawares, as was the case after the general elections of June 7th, 2015 [1], when the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) polled over 13% [2].

Why Did the Government Opt for a Referendum?

President Erdoğan, when faced with the fragmentation of the ruling power bloc — which became evident with the failed July 15th coup attempt organized by the Gülenists [3], his erstwhile allies — was obligated to form a fresh alliance with various other groups within the state apparatus. The basis of this new alliance was waging war against the Kurds in Turkey and Northern Syria, and especially, preventing the creation of a "Kurdish corridor" in Rojava. Erdoğan's 180-degree turn on the Kurdish question gave him leverage in building new alliances and strengthening his position within the state, thereby expanding his social base [4].

Rampant militarism served to render the state of emergency — declared after the July 15th coup — legitimate and acceptable. It also bound together various political cliques with conflicting interests. The result was a series of so-called "national and patriotic" alliances within the state apparatus. Erdoğan's rapprochement with nationalist figures such as Bahçeli, Perinçek, Ağar, Feyzioğlu, and Baykal gave him the chance to present himself as the leader and spokesperson of the state's united backlash against the Kurds, in the complicated political conditions following the coup attempt.

However, had this new alliance become permanent, it would have been necessary to strike a balance among these different groups, and therefore to share power with them, as was once the case with

the Gülenists. At that point, the referendum appeared as the best way to prevent such a power-sharing arrangement, and to reorganize the relations between these interests under the undisputed dominance of Erdoğan. Although the referendum risked alienating some of Erdoğan's new allies, it was meant to simplify the rivalry between these cliques within the state by confirming his position as the central authority.

A Fragmented “Yes” Front

Although many observers, including some on the Left, attribute a kind of omnipotence to Erdoğan, the referendum is a very risky bet with an uncertain outcome. The government's initial claim that the outcome would be a resounding victory has dissipated rapidly. Even those in government circles have been obliged to confess indirectly that the vote will be a close one. Although the Erdoğanist block seems strong on paper, it has so far been unsuccessful in dominating the referendum debate and establishing its uncontested supremacy. Indeed, the apparatus of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), perhaps for the first time, seems disorderly in the run-up to the electoral process.

Those in government circles are concerned that some constituencies of the AKP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which acts like a de facto coalition partner to the AKP, may not perform as expected in the referendum. The MHP's supporters across Central Anatolia, who are known to vacillate between the AKP and the MHP, seem to skew strongly towards a “Yes” vote; however, a large part of its supporters in the Western and Southern coastal regions may opt for the “No” vote. It seems that even the AKP's aggressive ground incursion in Northern Syria failed to create a drastic change of sentiment in this group. Nor did the government's attempts to equate “No” voters with terrorists and traitors gain traction. Likewise, in the AKP constituency, there are some anxious pragmatists who may refrain from voting “Yes” even if they don't vote “No,” who have started to express their opinions more openly. In contrast, the HDP's massive meetings in celebration of the Nawroz festival have shown that the Kurdish party's ties with its base remain strong despite claims to the contrary, and that the “No” may poll strongly in the Kurdish provinces.

Possible Outcomes

Although it is impossible to predict the referendum's results, the difference between the “Yes” and “No” votes will likely be minimal. As such, even if the “Yes” prevails by a thin margin, it will not be enough to stabilize Turkey's fragile Bonapartist regime. Turkey lacks many of the conditions favorable to the reinforcement of an absolutist regime, such as robust international alliances, long-term economic stability, expected high growth, or a consensus within the ruling class. As such, a victory of the “Yes” vote by a small margin will not mean that all is lost for the social opposition. Such a defeat would certainly lead to a serious loss of morale, but would not necessarily result in an irreversible defeat.

In the case that the “No” vote prevails, although many would expect an escalation of state violence and a swift reestablishment of Erdoğan's dominance — based on the experience after the June 7th elections — he may not pull it off so easily this time. If Erdoğan, who found himself obligated to opt for a referendum due to increased fragility within the state, fails to reorganize alliances in the state apparatus to his advantage through the referendum, his leeway will shrink significantly. A victory of the “No” vote could accelerate the fragmentation of the right-wing bloc, and limit Erdoğan's credibility and clout in the struggle among different political groups. Such a result could therefore lead to serious fragility and maybe even a decomposition of the current power balance, which is

already far from stable.

However, in any case, the aftermath of the referendum will not be easy for the social opposition, as the government will most likely launch a harsh crackdown. A victory of the “No” vote would provide morale to the opposition and expand its capacity to maneuver; however, its job will become much more complicated after April 16th. As such, it is necessary to brace ourselves for the post-referendum period, which may be difficult, but nevertheless conducive to a constituent political line.

After April 16th

The various “No” campaigns have already brought about a certain strengthening of the social opposition, which seems to have overcome the passivity and trepidation of the past year. However, we must not forget that this mobilization is still relatively weak considering the challenge ahead, and that it is sometimes fraught with problematic political discourse, bordering on liberalism and even nationalism. Although the “No” campaigns have given the socialist left the chance to return to the streets and to political activity among the masses, the socialist left constitutes only a small fraction of the “No” campaigns. There has been a significant dip in the socialist left’s capacity to intervene in the political arena on a larger scale. As such, the question that remains is how the socialist left will compensate for this weakness after the referendum and once again become a considerable force in the political arena.

A harsh political climate awaits us after April 16th, regardless of whether “Yes” or “No” prevails at the ballot box. The rise in animosity towards the Kurds and xenophobia towards Syrian refugees should be understood in such a context. Just as the “Yes” campaign is strongly anchored in nationalist themes, the “No” campaigns organized by the Republican People’s Party or by dissidents within the MHP place a large emphasis on nationalist arguments. The overall result has been an expansion of nationalist discourse during the referendum process. This aggregate growth of different, rival dialects of nationalism will pose a crucial challenge for us after the referendum.

Unless the fight against authoritarianism is merged with the struggle against patriarchy and capitalism, the political arena may become limited to a fight among different right-wing cliques. The Left’s existing efforts to build a “holistic” anti-authoritarian stance with clear class content are of course important and valuable. However, due to its structural defects, the socialist movement fails to make this stance politically visible to a wider base. As a result, liberal, nationalist, or republican arguments, devoid of class content, are much more noticeable in the political arena. It is necessary to employ united front tactics in order to make our political stance much more visible. We have the possibility to blend, in creative ways, the different strands of the social opposition which currently are largely repressed. By capitalizing on the inclusive and pluralist forms of opposition created during the referendum campaigns, we can strengthen our united struggle [\[5\]](#) and commence action on multiple fronts in the aftermath of the referendum.

Despite all its limitations and deficiencies, the mobilization during the referendum provides a valuable starting point, and indicates the resources still available to the social opposition. We must give due importance to this mobilization, sustain it beyond April 16th, and turn the neighborhood “No” assemblies into the cornerstones of a united front from below. In the difficult post-referendum period, these assemblies may undertake joint political action to place the demands of workers and the oppressed on the political agenda. For instance, it may be possible after the referendum to launch a powerful joint struggle for the repeal of the countrywide state of emergency. A united front will not only boost the socialist left’s capacity to intervene in the political arena, but also create a “megaphone effect” to prevent social struggles from becoming invisible and isolated.

It is time to raise the slogan, “This is just the beginning, the struggle continues!” engraved in our hearts and minds since the Gezi uprising.

Başlangıç

P.S.

* “Just the Beginning”. Jacobin. 4.15.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/turkey-referendum-erdogan-coup-akp-hdp/>

* Başlangıç is a network of leftist activists founded after the Gezi Park protests in Turkey. Their website and journal are available at baslangicdergi.org.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/06/hdp-victory-turkey-erdogan-elections/>

[2] <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>

[3] ESSF (article 38530), [What Happened in Turkey? – “Neither a military coup for democracy nor democracy against a military coup”](#).

[4] <http://www.leftvoice.org/Turkey-s-Fragile-Bonapartism>

[5] ESSF (article 38529), [Erdoğan and Turkey’s Authoritarian Turn](#).