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## Issue Brief

# Turkey Referendum 2017: A Democratic Quest?

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**“Don’t beat the air... it is too late now”. This was stated by President Erdogan, of Turkey in his post referendum victory speech. In one breath, he appeared to reach out to his opponents, calling the results a “victory of everyone who**



**said yes and no.”<sup>1</sup> But in the next moment, he pledged to restore the death penalty<sup>2</sup> and derided the oppositions plan to contest the result.**

On April 16, in a defining moment that the country’s opposition fears may fortify a system of authoritarian rule within a country considered one of the critical power brokers of the Middle East, a small majority of Turkish voters agreed to grant extensive powers to their president. The constitutional change will allow the winner of the 2019 presidential election to assume full control of the government, ending the current parliamentary political system.

Out of the nearly 99 per cent of votes counted, supporters of the proposal had 51.3 per cent of votes cast, and opponents had 48.7 per cent. Though the result will take days to confirm, the main opposition party said it would insist on a recount of about 37 per cent of ballot boxes after the election board made a last-minute decision to increase the burden needed to prove accusations of ballot-box stuffing.<sup>3</sup>

The main opposition; Republican People's Party (CHP), pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) and other critics argue the modifications will give too much power to one individual, thereby undermining the separation of powers in the government.

Thousands of people took to the streets of Istanbul and other Turkish cities late on April 17 to protest the results of the referendum. The protesters expressed anger about last-minute changes to the voting

<sup>1</sup> <http://hungarytoday.hu/~newsinfo/latest/erdogan-claims-narrow-victory-in-turkish-referendum>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/glogin?URI=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2017%2F04%2F16%2Fworld%2Furope%2Fturkey-referendum-polls-erdogan.html%3F\\_r%3D0](https://www.nytimes.com/glogin?URI=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2017%2F04%2F16%2Fworld%2Furope%2Fturkey-referendum-polls-erdogan.html%3F_r%3D0)

procedures and an electoral board decision to allow as valid more than a million ballots cast without an official stamp. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) said the legal framework for the referendum "remained inadequate for the holding of a genuinely democratic referendum."<sup>4</sup> Representatives from a coalition of international bodies have stated that the vote took place on an "unlevel playing field"<sup>5</sup> because voters were not provided with sufficient information, opposition voices were muzzled and the rules were changed at the last minute.<sup>6</sup>

However, the result was already a political reality, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan acclaimed his victory in Istanbul proudly stating: "We are enacting the most important governmental reform of our history."<sup>7</sup> His Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) believe that the new system will make Turkey more efficient and stable.

Turkey has been under a state of emergency since a group in the Turkish army tried to overthrow the government in a failed coup attempt that killed around 300 people. This referendum has immediate consequences. The "yes" vote in the referendum is an endorsement of the current leadership style of Mr. Erdogan, who has been acting as the head of government since his election in 2014 despite having no constitutional right to wield such power.

Shifting from parliamentary system to presidential system is nothing short of a democratic quest for Turkey. Over the years, Turkish politics of the past not only witnessed clashes between the president and the prime minister; it was also an era of fruitless coalition after coalition when precious time and resources of the country were wasted. Among other changes, the new system will:

- Abolish the post of prime minister and transfer executive power to the president.
- Allow the newly empowered president to issue decrees and appoint many judges and officials responsible for scrutinizing his decisions.
- Limit the president to two five-year terms, but give the option of running for a third term if Parliament truncates the second one by calling for early elections.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nwahomepage.com/news/world-news/turkey-referendum-result-challenged/692944991>

<sup>5</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/17/europe/turkey-referendum-results-erdogan/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <http://projects.registerguard.com/rg/news/local/35490419-75/turkeys-erdogan-wins-vast-powers.html.csp>

- Allow the president to order disciplinary inquiries into any of Turkey's 3.5 million civil servants, according to an analysis by the head of the Turkish Bar Association.

Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated President Erdogan for winning the referendum a day after the US President Donald Trump has become the first Western leader to congratulate the Turkish President.<sup>8</sup>

Qatar, Guinea, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan have directly congratulated Erdogan. Turkey's historic allies - the NATO countries all refrained from reaching out. Moreover, the result of Turkey's referendum could completely finish off what was left of that European Union-Turkey courtship. However, it is expected that Mr. Erdogan will lead "a charm offensive toward Europe and the US to gain validation of the new system."<sup>9</sup> However, on the flip side, if Turkey does decide it no longer wants to join the EU, the present migrant deal which has become a bone of contention between Ankara and the EU may come to an end and Turkey may decide to turn inward or look for new allies in the east.

With regards to the Middle East, tens of thousands of Syrian citizens have sought refuge in Turkey and Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak announced late in February that some Syrian refugees living in Turkey "will be granted Turkish citizenship after the April 16 referendum."<sup>10</sup> A now stronger Erdogan is also highly likely to stand firmer in the face of Bashar al-Assad as well. In essence, a stronger Turkish president is likely to benefit Syrians.

All in all, the referendum result has revealed a deeply divided country, nearly half of which now feels highly embittered. Mr. Erdogan's victory will enhance the stability of the government, but it will weaken social stability. The result also tightens Erdogan's grip on a country, which is one of the leading actors in the Syrian civil war, a major way station along the migration routes to Europe and a crucial Middle Eastern partner of the United States and Russia.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/17/donald-trump-erdogan-turkey-referendum-congratulations>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-wary-of-trump-china-launches-eu-charm-offensive-diplomats-2017-3>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2017/02/23/some-syrians-to-be-granted-turkish-citizenship-after-april-16>