

May 2017

Erdoğan's Post-Referendum Paradox

By E. Fuat Keyman and Megan Gisclon

Since announcing his victory following the results of the April 16 constitutional referendum — in which votes for a “Yes” to a new presidential system won by a close margin of 51.4 percent to 48.6 percent voting “No” — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has faced an unprecedented challenge to his governance. Amid the hype of campaigning for Erdoğan's new presidential system *alla Turca*, one crucial element of democratic governance went unforeseen — the challenge of governing the nearly 49 percent that did not vote for the president's vast expansion of power and desire for executive presidency. The thin majority by which the referendum passed has seemingly set up the president for greater problems in governing a polarized and divided Turkey.

For many at the ballot box, the April 16 referendum was not about what was on the ballot but rather who. Although the electorate effectively gave the Turkish Grand National Assembly the legal power to implement 18 amendments to the constitution in favor of a shift to the presidential system, the point of consensus — or rather contention — rests solely on the voters' ability to see Erdoğan as either the benign savior of Turkish democracy or a strong executive president without checks and balances. The whole election campaign, having taken place under unfair circumstances, has further created an ambiguous debate on the content of the amendments versus the democratic governance of Turkey. Popular protests against the election results and the findings from international election watchdogs such as the OSCE have been no help in brokering either the legal or the sociological legitimacy of referendum's results, much less the governance of Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AK Party).¹

1 “Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017,” OSCE, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/303681>.

The referendum has bred two unforeseen paradoxes for the new presidential system: first, concerning the opposition of Turkey's pivotal cities; second, concerning Turkey's ambivalent “Kurdish question” and the government's dissonant alliance with the Turkish nationalist camp. In light of these paradoxes, Turkey has reached a crossroads in not only by whom but also in how it is governed. While the president now (seemingly) has the legal legitimacy to make the necessary changes toward a presidential system, whether or not he possesses, much less maintains, the sociological legitimacy to govern Turkey remains an open question.

The Paradox of Governing Urbanization

In the final results of the referendum, Erdoğan lost four out of five of Turkey's biggest cities, the cosmopolitan global center of Istanbul, the political capital Ankara, the historic port city of Izmir, and the tourism hub Antalya — solely maintaining a majority hold in Bursa, Turkey's fourth largest city. It was the first time since the Welfare Party's victory in 1994 that the country's two largest cities did not vote according to the conservative majority. A total of 17 out of Turkey's 30 metropolitan cities also cast their vote for “No.”

While the results of this data are admittedly too close to analyze under the broader calculus, and often cliché, of “urban-rural” divide, the thin loss of Turkey's major metropolitan areas is nevertheless significant when looking at the developing social structure within Turkey's rapidly urbanizing landscape. The 50-year pattern of urbanization has been an important phenomenon that the AK Party has contended with over its last 15 years in power. Currently, 73 percent of the country's population resides in an urban setting.² But while

2 “Urban population (percent of total),” The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>.

these smaller, largely Anatolian cities have chiefly maintained their traditional colors and characteristics (i.e. conservatism) as the recent rapid urbanization has stemmed from this Anatolian periphery, major metropolitan cities have adapted strikingly different features.

The referendum has exposed the shifting identities of a new urban middle class, which largely expressed its skepticism toward the proposed system on April 16. When looking into this urban social structure in pivotal cities, the more educated (high school and university graduates) voted “No,” while the least educated (primary and middle school graduates) voted “Yes.”³ Turkey’s major metro areas have long been home to the country’s leading universities, cosmopolitan populations, and citizens with active, global lifestyles. Many of those who have entered such spaces have come to assimilate around this nouveau middle-class lifestyle — marking these urban dwellers as the most educated, global, and active population in Turkey. As discussed within the context of the Gezi movement in 2013, the more urbanized and educated Turkish citizenship has become, the more likely citizens will express skepticism about the strong presidency with weak checks and balances.

It is thus paradoxical that while the AK Party has been the active agent and motor of urbanization for the past 15 years, the referendum has shown that it is losing its grasp of the same areas it has worked so hard to develop. While on the one hand, the success of the AK Party is often identified with its vast expansion of public transport, interconnections between major cities, and a variety of urban mega-projects ranging from bridges to underwater highways and railways, on the other, it is this same success that is also associated with hostility between the government and its public.

Responding to the Kurdish Message

The “Kurdish Question” has long been anathema to the AK Party, having brokered but then failed to maintain a peace process between the state and the outlawed Kurdish separatist group the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). However, examining the results of the referendum, it was the Kurdish-populated east and southeast regions — despite being mired in an ongoing conflict between the PKK and the Turkish security forces — that saw one of the largest positive differentials between those voting “Yes” to the referendum and those who voted for Erdoğan in the 2014 presidential elections.

The government and a number of Kurdish leaders have interpreted this movement in east and southeast

³ “Turkish Referendum,” IPSOS, April 20, 2017, <https://www.ipsos.com/en/turkish-referendum>.

Turkey as a show of the Kurdish desire for normalcy, the will to seek an end to conflict, and a return to politics, deliberation, and mediation.”⁴ This vote can be taken as the fourth historic signal of the desire for stabilization between the government and the Kurds, including the Peace Process, the Kurds’ rejection of the PKK’s urban warfare, and the Kurds’ firm stance against the attempted coup on July 15, 2016.

The results of the referendum are deeply ironic in that while it was the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) — the right-wing nationalist party opposed to any type of negotiation with Kurdish groups — who led the call for the presidential system alongside the AK Party, it is the voices of the Kurdish people that have been most loudly heard across Turkey. Paradoxically, while Kurdish support for Erdoğan’s political governance grew by an estimated 10 percent among Kurds,⁵ 73 percent of MHP voters said “No” on the day of the referendum⁶ — not only breaking from their party’s leadership but also defacing the broader conservative-nationalist alliance.

Although this tactic support for Erdoğan and the AK Party is far from unanimous among Kurdish groups,⁷ the likely implosion of the conservative-national alliance makes it all the more important that Erdoğan hold on to this new cadre. With new powers in the president’s hand, these Kurdish voters have elevated Erdoğan as the guarantor of stability and democracy, a responsibility they will continually reassess at the ballot box. It is thus important that Erdoğan live up to this role or risk his newfound support.

What’s Next?

What is next for Turkish democracy depends largely on Erdoğan and the AK Party’s ability to respond to these paradoxes. It is pertinent that the government maintains control and stability in the lead-up to the forthcoming local and parliamentary elections in 2019. To ensure victory, Erdoğan must confront not only urban polarization and respond to the Kurds’ show of support for political stability but also address a number

⁴ As an example of one government opinion, see İbrahim Kalın, “April 16: A historic day for Turkish democracy,” Daily Sabah, April 19, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2017/04/19/april-16-a-historic-day-for-turkish-democracy>.

⁵ This figure is estimated by comparing the percentage of “Yes” voters with those who voted for the AK Party in the November 1 election residing in majority Kurdish populated areas. For a city-by-city breakdown of these figures, see CNN Türk’s post-referendum analysis: <http://www.cnntrk.com/election-2017>.

⁶ “Turkish Referendum,” IPSOS.

⁷ Amberin Zaman, “Turkey’s AKP claims Kurdish support for referendum, Kurds say otherwise,” Al Monitor, April 20, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/akp-claims-kurdish-support-referendum.html>.

of security related concerns and mend broader divisions down several religious, ethnic, and ideological fault lines.

Polarization is likely to grow if the government cannot respond to the popular call to re-examine the electoral outcomes of the referendum. The government will continue to confront challenges to its legal mandate to rule versus its sociological ability to govern if it cannot build bridges across society. The AK Party is in need of reform to tackle with this problem of polarization, especially as its nationalist alliance with the MHP remains under threat. The slim increase of Kurdish popular support is not yet enough to fight the loss of the former's electoral power.

Approaching 2019, the government faces the choice of whether to align with other segments of society in a way to enhance the possibility of reconciliation in terms of secularism and ethnicity, or to turn inward and consolidate its power. When predicting this future, however, one should not forget the experience of the AK Party since 2002: an experience based on perpetual victory and dominance, shaped much more by sociological legitimacy than legal legitimacy. Now that the tables have seemingly turned — with the government now holding relative legal legitimacy but not necessarily sociological legitimacy, especially within cities and among its nationalist allies — it remains to be seen how Erdoğan and the AK Party will attempt to govern under the new status quo.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

About the Author

E. Fuat Keyman is director of Istanbul Policy Center. Megan Gislson is an editor and researcher at the Istanbul Policy Center.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representation in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the *On Turkey* Series

GMF's *On Turkey* is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our website.