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## Presidential Referendum: A Pivotal Moment in Turkey's Prolonged Election Cycle

By *Emre Erdogan*

2016 was supposed to be a quiet year in Turkey. Erdoğan was elected president in August 2014, and the AK Party had won the early elections held in November 2015 with a clear margin and regained the parliamentary majority, which it had lost in the June 2015 elections. On the other hand, the AK Party's majority was not enough to change the constitution or initiate a constitutional referendum, meaning the quest for a presidential system was put in the back burner and another source of uncertainty was eliminated. The stars seemed to be lined up for a period of relative political stability in 2016. However, the outcome was very different.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and self-proclaimed Islamic State group continued their terrorist attacks in Turkey. The 28 attacks conducted by these two groups resulted in 375 deaths and 1,548 wounded in 2016 alone. Then came the unexpected leadership change at the AK Party. As requested by President Erdoğan, Ahmet Davutoğlu stepped down and Binali Yıldırım replaced him as chairman of the AK Party and prime minister. But the biggest shock in 2016 was undoubtedly the attempted coup on July 15 during which the parliament and government buildings were bombed, 240 people were killed and 1,500 people were wounded by the putschist soldiers. The attempted coup led to a state of emergency and a massive purge in which 70,000 were detained, 40,000 arrested, 70,000 suspended from civil service, several companies including educational institutions, media outlets, and hospitals were closed down or transferred to the state.

Another surprise came toward the end of the year when the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) declared his support for a presidential system of government enabling the AK Party to initiate a referendum on this matter. A constitutional amendment package consisting of changes in 18 articles was approved by a qualified majority in the

parliament, President Erdoğan called for a referendum and the Supreme Election Council decided to hold the referendum on April 16.

In the proposed system, the president would hold all executive power and hold legislative powers through presidential decrees and the power to veto legislative decisions by the parliament unless a qualified majority supports them. The system also gives the president the right to appoint his cabinet and all senior bureaucrats without the requirement of parliamentary approval.

### Yes vs. No

The first competition in the referendum campaign has been in terms of framing the proposed changes to Turkey's system of government. The "Yes" camp led by the AK Party uses two frames. First, they argue that Turkey is facing an existential crisis and a 360 degrees threat from the Gülen Network, which the Turkish government has officially labeled Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO), along with PKK, IS and other "external enemies." The follow up argument is that Turkey needs a strong executive to cope with this existential crisis. The second frame used by the "Yes" camp is the need to consolidate executive power in order to avoid undesirable situations such as ineffective coalition governments and friction between the president and prime minister. Well-known populist slogans such as national unity, stability, empowering the people, the elite versus the people are used extensively by the "Yes" camp.

The "No" camp, led by CHP also has two frames. First, they argue that the proposed changes are aiming at establishing a one man rule and will lead to authoritarianism. Second, they make a comparison of countries under presidential and parliamentary systems to make the point that with a few exceptions, presidential systems lead to underdevelopment.

The CHP and its leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, are heading the “No” campaign, but MHP opposition is also contributing in significant ways. Whereas the Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, having lost its operational capacity as its leaders’ and deputies are under arrest, is not campaigning actively. The CHP strategy is based on two assumptions. The first of these is that the referendum can fail only if significant number of AK Party and MHP voters defect. The second assumption is that this will happen anyway unless CHP gets in the way by increasing political tension. CHP also avoids polarizing issues such as secularism and instead prefers to stick to the argument that the proposed system would lead to a one man rule which would lead Turkey to authoritarianism and poverty. However, this strategy is often violated by the party grassroots who continue to use polarizing arguments. The MHP opposition has been reenergized and is leading a very limited “No” campaign due to resources and government pressure, but nevertheless is making a difference by diversifying the “No” camp.

### **An AKParty Advantage**

The campaign styles of the two camps differ widely. The “Yes” campaign is conducted mainly by President Erdoğan and the AK Party. Both President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Yıldırım are holding separate public rallies on a daily basis and these are usually live broadcasted by the most TV and radio channels. While Erdoğan and Yıldırım were using a more temperate language in the beginning of the campaign, they have gradually moved to a more combative language most likely as a result of the feedback they received through public opinion polls. They also began to target the CHP and its leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu with the assumption that political tension will consolidate their ranks.

The “Yes” camp has several advantages. To start with, AK Party and MHP represent 60 percent of the voters between the two of them. Second, they have the most charismatic and skillful campaigner in the country who is no one other than President Erdoğan. Third, they command much larger funding resources than the parties in the “No” camp. Fourth, the “Yes” camp uses executive power and emergency rule to gain an enormous advantage in all kinds of media except social media. In such a tight race, every vote will matter and as the recent presidential election in the United States showed, there is no way to win an election if your supporters do not come out to vote. While the AK Party is well-known for its mobilization capacity, the same thing is not true for the opposition camp.

Despite these advantages, all polls suggest a neck-to-neck race with the difference between “Yes” and “No” votes. The CHP and HDP voters appear poised to vote no. While a big majority of the AK Party voters are poised to vote in favor of the proposed changes, a small but significant portion of them are expected to vote no. The MHP voters are divided with a majority tending toward the no vote despite the offi-

cial party position. Under these circumstances, no prediction on the result of the referendum could go beyond speculation.

### **The Day After**

In case the package is approved by the majority of the voters, the new system will be fully implemented after a transitional phase. According to the proposed package, the presidential system will be in force in 2019 after both the parliamentary and presidential elections are held. However, there is a loophole which could make the transition faster. If the parliament decides to go to early elections and the president simultaneously steps down to present himself as a candidate in the presidential election that would automatically be held, the transition could technically take place as soon as next fall.

If the package is rejected in the referendum, AK Party could go to snap elections, where they would aim to push the MHP and HDP down the 10 percent threshold and gain a two thirds majority in the parliament and change the constitution in the parliament without the need to go to a referendum.

It seems that regardless of the outcome of the referendum, Turkey will remain in a prolonged election cycle, which started in 2015 and anyone expecting political stability in 2017 is likely to be disappointed.

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### **About the Author**

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