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Turkey After the Referendum

By *GALIP DALAY*

The parliamentary system Turkey has had for more than a century came to end on April 16, 2017. In its place is a new experiment with a super-executive presidency. This decision is historic and has far-reaching consequences.

Before delving into the political picture that has emerged from this referendum, we first need to consider some facts. The package put to a referendum contained 18 articles, with a change of political system being the cardinal goal of the package. In addition, the package also contained articles that restructured the top judicial bodies and annulled the military judiciary. The pro-change camp, spearheaded by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), included all nationalist, conservative, and Islamic parties aside from the small pro-Islamic Felicity Party. The anti-change camp included the Republican People's Party, pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), the Felicity Party, and some other marginal parties and groups. As a reference point, the last general election on November 1, 2015 showed that the "Yes" camp attracted close to 63 percent of the vote, whereas the "No" camp's electoral base stood at around 37 percent. The package passed by a ratio of 51.4 percent in favor and 48.6 against. When the AKP and the MHP's combined votes in the last election are taken as a benchmark, the "Yes" camp's vote went down in almost every area of the country except in the Kurdish-majority east and southeast regions — nonetheless, "No" votes predominated in most of the Kurdish majority cities in the region, particularly in the southeast.

In the run up to the election, the governing AK Party, rather than debate the content of the package, focused on the person most likely to become Turkey's first executive president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. With this strategy, the party believed that Erdoğan's popularity would be instrumentalized to popularize the package, which was not very

popular in itself, particularly at the outset. The AK Party made the referendum more a vote of confidence in Erdoğan than one on the proposed constitutional change. The package passed the 50 percent threshold, but it remained 11-12 percent below the combined votes of the "Yes" camp in the last election. A significant chunk of voters chose to focus on the content of the package — performance-based politics or political demands — over identity politics. This is a promising development, as the share of performance-based is one measure of the health of any political system.

Unsettling New Trends

Despite the small margins and fragility of the win, the end result will not change. Turkey now has a new political system. Nevertheless, the outcome of the referendum and the political map that emerged from it has illustrated some unsettling trends that the governing AK Party has to thoroughly take into account.

In terms of the educational, urbanization, and economic prosperity, the picture that emerged from the referendum should concern the AK Party's political elite.¹ There appears to be a reverse correlation between the AK Party's political fortunes and these criteria. Likewise, it seems that the AK Party's appeal to the youth is waning. According to the results of a poll conducted by the IPSOS in the aftermath of the referendum, of first time voters, 58 percent voted "No" whereas 42 percent voted "Yes." Therefore the picture that has emerged demonstrates that the AK Party is coming face to face with the sociology that its policies helped to create. Politically, it needs to catch up with the sociological transformation that Turkey has undergone under its rule.

¹ IPSOS, "Anayasa Değişikliği Referandumunu Sandık Sonrası Araştırması," Ipsos Sosyal Araştırmalar Enstitüsü, April 2017.

Not Division, but Normalization in the Political Sphere

The picture that has emerged refutes the observation widely offered in the aftermath of the referendum: the referendum has produced a picture of largely divided society. Given the marginal gap between “Yes” and “No” votes, and the significance of identify politics or sociopolitical fault-lines in Turkey’s electoral history coupled with consolidation within these identity-blocs, it is tempting to depict the outcome as testament to the divided nature of Turkey’s society and politics. But a deeper examination points in a different direction. This picture can rather be taken as proof of the maturity of the Turkey’s electorate, despite an intense campaign characterized by the political psychology generated by the failed coup attempt, significant investment in Turkey’s identity fault-lines as a means of achieving consolidation of political bases and identity groups, and a range of crises with European countries — primarily the Netherlands and Germany. A significant proportion of voters did not vote along identity lines. A closer look at the demographic and geographic map of this referendum reveals that they have prioritized performance-based politics over identity politics. The fact that traditionally conservative districts in Istanbul such as Uskudar and Eyup voted “No,” and Fatih barely voted “Yes” demonstrates how politically mature voters have become. This performance-oriented electorate is the guarantor of democracy and it needs to be enlarged.

A closer examination of political and social transformation that are taking place within each identity/political bloc is crucial in understanding the future trajectory of Turkish politics.

Governing Post-Referendum Turkey

But what does the post-referendum period signify for the governing AK Party and its policies?

First, Erdoğan is the leader of conservative Islamic movement, of which the AK Party is a component.² The distinction between the party and larger conservative-Islamic movement was not as visible or salient when Erdoğan was both the chairman of the AK Party and prime minister at the same time. The distinction emerged and became visible when Erdoğan moved to the presidency, and hence officially had to cut his ties to his party. Since then, though, the AK Party has had two chairmen and prime ministers, while Erdoğan remained the leader of larger conservative-Islamic section of society. This created a tension between the legal source of power and leadership as embodied in the office of the party chairmanship and premiership and a sociopolitical one as embodied in the figure of Erdoğan. This duality generated tension. With the passage of this constitutional package, one of the items that will immediately come into

² Galip Dalay, “What Does Davutoğlu’s Departure Mean for the AK-Party and Turkey at Large?” On Turkey, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 15, 2016.

force will be the provision that allows for the president to become a member of (and to lead) a political party. Taking advantage of this provision, Erdoğan became the member of the AK party on May 2, and will inherit the position of chairmanship at the party’s extraordinary convention to be held on May 21. Hence, this duality in terms of leadership, not only for the AK Party but also for the larger conservative-Islamic section of society, will come to an end. After this clarification and legitimization of the leadership issue, Erdoğan is likely to attempt to energize the party’s main bodies by reshuffling and rejuvenating them, a precursor to a cabinet reshuffle. This process will not be confined to the political sphere. As Erdoğan effectively serves as the leader of the larger conservative-Islamic section of the society, he is also likely to try to energize the societal sphere of the conservative-political section of society.

A Siege mentality

In recent years, the AK Party has adopted a siege mentality. The Gezi park protests, the coup in Egypt — and the West’s failure to uphold its principle of supporting democracy and human rights in the face of this bloody coup — as well as the struggle with Gülenists and a vicious coup attempt in July 2016, have all created a siege mentality among the party’s elites. Given the past tumultuous three to four years, this is understandable, but it has not been fruitful. This political psychology and negative political agenda will not help Turkey deal with any of the challenges it presently faces.

Another outcome of this siege mentality is that the party has failed to advance any new, inclusive, and positive narrative. The fear factor has become the major defining element of politics in recent years. The lack of a new and forward-looking narrative is one of the major reasons that the AK Party faces difficulty in appealing to young people or to many urban, middle-class conservatives.

These groups are weary of losing the gains that they have made under the AK Party. Therefore, the fear factor is partially effective within this section of society as well. Yet, the fear factor can’t sustain the support of this group for long. They have been the main beneficiary of a positive agenda and resonating narrative during the AK Party’s first decade of rule. They can tolerate a transitional period turning away from this positive agenda as a result of a tense domestic and foreign policy context. Yet they are unlikely to accept a long-term trend of a fear and security-driven agenda and a negative narrative as the party’s new normal. If this trend becomes the AK Party’s default setting, it will further alienate this section of society

Rectifying Steps

During the period of transition to an executive presidency from 2017–2019, and with the harmonization package for the transition, the AK Party will be well-advised to discard

this mentality. The harmonization package should aim at least partially to remedy the democratic deficits of the constitutional package. The election and political parties' laws are among the few files that need to be tackled in earnest. In a similar vein, the state of emergency that Turkey introduced in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt should not turn into Turkey's new normal. It was a necessary response measure at the time, yet risks becoming a new normal for the country. The more this lingers on, the more grievances it leaves behind and hence the less chance of political-societal reconciliation. Now that the referendum period is over, the government should aim to end the state of emergency as soon as possible.

The accumulated effects of these factors are that the AK Party is experiencing a shrinking of its cadres at the level of its own elites and its policies have become more introverted, reactive, and security-driven, and this is an inimical trend that needs to be reversed.

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