

A Personality Cult that Plays on Popular Fears: How Erdogan Won the Turkish Referendum

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Turkey has narrowly voted to approve a set of reforms that will place more power in the hands of President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan, giving him the ability to appoint judges, abolish the office of prime minister and curtail the role of parliament. Tahir Abbas explains how the febrile atmosphere of the past two years – and in particular popular fear of terrorism – has enabled Erdoğan to win the vote.

It was arguably the most important of all the referendums held in Turkey since 2002 and the rise of the AKP. For the last 15 years or so, one man, Tayyip Recep Erdoğan, at the helm of his Justice and Development Party (AKP), has taken Turkey out of the dark of the early 2000s – a banking crisis, rampant inflation and a politico-ideological vacuum. Erdoğan thrust Turkey into the light of the 21st century, re-imagining the nation through globalisation, majoritarian nationalism (read as populism in the West) and moderate Islamism.

During this period, Turkey transformed its fortunes – it joined the G20, and became a significant player in the Middle and Near East. Once dubbed ‘the sick man of Europe’ as the Europeans prepared for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it is now ‘old Europe’ that faces the possibility of breakup post-Brexit.

The Yes vote was a [narrow win for Erdoğan](#): Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir voted ‘No’. Uncharacteristically, eighty per cent of British Turks also voted No. Turks voted Yes on 18 constitutional amendments, many of which will grant wide-ranging powers to the president. They include the ability to appoint members of the senior judiciary, do away with the office of the Prime Minister and directly appoint and fire ministers who will no longer be able to issue a vote of no confidence in the president. The number of parliamentarians will increase by 50 to 600. The voting age will be reduced to 18. For the Yes campaigners, these reforms were necessary to improve a system of government that is seen as generally ineffective and slow to react to events. The need to iron out unworkable aspects of the old constitution, established by the military junta after the 1980 coup, was seen as key.

The referendum campaign had an important international dimension. Erdoğan sent ministers to Germany and the Netherlands despite knowing that according to EU rules, parties are not allowed to campaign outside of Turkish territories. The negative response that the ministers received in the Netherlands was directly related to the Dutch general election, which was polarised along pro- versus anti-Islamophobia lines relating to domestic economic and social issues. Erdoğan exploited this opportunity to maximum effect, knowing that Turks inside Turkey would be galvanised by the idea of a strong leader standing up to external resistance. Both Dutch and Turkish sides took advantage of the opportunity to secure votes for their own campaigns. In both countries, a great deal of work

is going to be required to repair long-standing diplomatic relations.



Support abroad ... Pro-Erdoğan demonstrators gather in Cologne, Germany, July 2016. Photo: [Andreas Trojak](#) via a [CC-BY 2.0 licence](#)

The No campaigners argued that the reforms will put too much power in hand of one individual – Erdoğan himself – who has been sliding towards greater authoritarianism since 2011. In particular, they argued that this authoritarianism is invasive – Islamist in character, design and impact – and that it is a throwback to the strongman politics that has brought much of the Middle East to its knees. It is where leaders, unable to govern their own people fairly and justly, look to the West for solutions to problems created by incompetence and self-interest (while the West has been complicit in installing and then propping up these so-called leaders in the first place). The No supporters argued that if the president got the powers he wanted, it would lead to greater isolation in the region and from the EU, as well as further strife for those Turks – especially in politics, academia and journalism – who feel their voices are being policed and silenced.

It was a fraught campaign, with inconsistent messages from the pollsters – although they mostly got it right, despite the difficulty of anticipating the power of social media to sway opinions and actions. Though Erdoğan will no doubt be overjoyed, the nation was deeply divided between the Yes and No camps, reflecting a polarised society. These divisions were exacerbated after the failed coup of July 2016.

Since that night, Turkey has been in a state of emergency. For a great many people, this state of emergency is real and urgent – but it also plays on existing fears, a sense of alarm and genuine issues of insecurity that have blighted Turkey internally and externally over the last two years or so. Internally, all the various peace processes have collapsed, namely the Alevi and the Kurdish openings. What was once a harmonious relationship between the AKP and the Gulen movement, which benefited both sides, has become an acrimonious, violent and wholly one-sided divorce. Erdoğan now characterises the enemy as a combination of FETO (the term used to describe the Gulen movement as a terrorist organisation) the PKK as emblematic of pro-Kurdish sentiment *per se*, and the suicide death squad known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. One Iraqi who speaks Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi and English was thrown in jail and then put on trial for 18 months. The charge: being a member of FETO, PKK

and IS – all because he assisted the Western news media as a local fixer in south-east Turkey.

Turkish politics today is about power, but also authority – and in a climate where strongman politics is able to gain the upper hand by evoking notions of security, strength and stability. A frightened population welcomes this rhetoric with open ears, seeing in the current president all that is right about Turkey now and in the future. There are, however, also concerns about the role of religion – which is odd given that the country is nominally 99.9% Muslim. There is a particular fear that Islamism, while it does not aim for a caliphate, is encroaching on the daily lives of all Turks, whether they want it to or not. To No Voters, the delicate balance between a secularist and religious outlook that has kept Turkey as the bridge between East and West is potentially at risk.

It could be argued that Erdoğan had the best of intentions, certainly at the outset. But his personality has taken over. All the founding fathers of the AKP have been cast aside. He is alone and isolated, but surrounded by sycophants enthralled by his personality cult. During his leadership – while considerable economic and social improvements were made from 2002-2010 – the rise of Islamic State in 2014 was inconceivable, although not improbable. Now political, economic and cultural issues carry the most force. The arguments on both sides have weight, but the concerns were less with the general situation but the issue of Erdoğan himself – hence the vehemence of the division between the Yes and No camps.

The outcome of this referendum was too close to call. A No vote could have meant that Turkey fundamentally changed political direction, as it would have emboldened individuals and groups at the fringes as well as across the spectrum of No voters. Now the Yes supporters' argument that strengthening the status quo will deliver a more robust, stable and secure society will be put the fullest of tests. Erdoğan's win will silence his detractors within the AKP, but the urban elites in wider society will continue to ask tough questions. As Turkey awakes to a new dawn, the rest of the world will be watching to see what happens next: a brave new world, or more of the same.

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