EUROPE 21.02.2017 | Amanda Paul

Iron Constitution

Why Turkish voters are likely to hand more power to the president

With the adoption of a controversial constitutional amendment package on 21 January, Turkey is now hurtling towards an executive presidency – a dramatic expansion of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers. Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) used their combined parliamentary majority to rush the bill through Parliament without any consequential debate.

The only thing now standing between Erdogan and his dream presidency is the nationwide referendum on the bill, expected in mid-April. If adopted, Turkey's political system will change fundamentally. We will see not only a new system of government but total regime change, moving Turkey away from the core norms of a pluralist, democratic state. The changes would likely come into force in 2019. The president will be allowed two five-year terms, meaning Erdogan could remain in power until 2029 or beyond.

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Should the Turkish people approve the bill, the president will gain unprecedented powers, including an increased influence over parliament and the courts – two main sources of checks and balances. Proposed amendments include allowing the President to keep membership of, and even chair, a political party, leading to the potential and plausible creation of a 'party state'. The post of prime minister will be abolished and all executive power currently under the prime minister and ministers will be transferred to the president. The president will be able to appoint one or more vice-presidents. He will also be able to dissolve the Parliament. Furthermore, the president will have considerable power over the Council of Judges and Prosecutors – tasked with ensuring judicial

independence. The proposed amendments also abolish the parliament's right to submit formal questions to the government, making it harder for MPs to concretely challenge the president's actions.

Unprecedented power

In Erdogan's own words, the presidential system "will be unique to Turkey". It will be more powerful than the French, Russian and US systems. The latter is built upon a clear separation of powers. Neither the executive, nor the legislative bodies can terminate one another. Indeed, Erdogan's current proposals will give the Turkish president more powers than Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Unlike the amendments adopted in January, the 1924 constitution did not give the president the authority to dissolve parliament or declare him commander-in-chief.

While Erdogan and senior AKP members assert an executive presidency will bring greater stability and prevent future political crises, opposition is fierce. Civil society, Turkey's liberals, all main parties outside the Parliament, numerous business and trade organisations along with academics, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), and the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) believe it will bring about one-man rule.

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Without the support of Devlet Bahçeli's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) the amendments would not have passed in parliament, since the AKP could not have obtained the required 330 votes on its own. Bahçeli had previously opposed an executive presidency, but was won round following the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt. The actual reasons for Bahçeli's U-turn remain obscure, although some speculate he made a deal, securing ministerial posts in return for his support.

Pressure on the media

Unfortunately, a tightly-controlled media has left most Turkish citizens in the dark about even the basic details of the reforms. Despite the government promising to televise the parliamentary debates, only a fraction of them were screened, and usually when most people were in bed. Ultimately the vote will be about President Erdogan rather than any

constitutional amendments.

The referendum is also being held at a time when Turkey remains under state-of-emergency rule, in place since the failed July coup, and when the country has suffered numerous terrorist attacks from both the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Society is polarised and anxious. The increased clampdown on government critics and the media is making experts, analysts and journalists self-censor. Meanwhile, many of Turkey's most influential journalists are languishing behind bars. The AKP controls most mainstream media, leaving its opponents with only social media – its reach patchy and insufficient - as a platform.

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According to polls, current support for an executive presidency is around 43%. Around 20 percent of AKP voters are undecided, while over half of MHP supporters oppose the move. Yet Erdogan is by far the most powerful orator and mobiliser in Turkey and will be working 24/7 to achieve the result he wants. His campaign will likely focus on security, stability and the economy, with deputy PM Numan Kurtulmuş recently prophesying an end to terror if voters approve an executive presidency at the ballot box.

MHP dissenters, along with the CHP and the HDP will be pushing the 'no' vote. They lost a key campaigner and charismatic speaker in HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas, currently in jail.

Erdogan's fantastic oratory skills and an unfair campaign environment makes a 'yes' vote probable. He has won every political battle since 2002. A 'no' vote would therefore be a huge boost for the opposition and Turkish democrats in general.



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