

Erdogan's Referendum: Expanding Executive Powers in Turkey

Written by Polat Urundul

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The Turkish Parliament approved constitutional changes giving President Erdogan executive powers over law and the parliament in the last few weeks. The proposed changes will also allow Erdogan to form a government and to appoint his ministers and deputies independently of the parliament. In addition, the constitutional change will give him the right to sign decree laws.

Turkey has been under a state of emergency since a group of soldiers in Turkish military, led by followers of the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen, currently in self-imposed exile in the United States, attempted a coup in 15th of July. The state of emergency following the failed coup attempt had the appearance of counter-coup due to a purge and arrests which led, by some local accounts, to a number of violations of human rights and the rule of law. Thousands of state officials were suspended or arrested after being subject to denunciations claiming their link to the Gulenist organisation. The purge and arrests did not remain limited to the members of Gulen's religious movement, which owns media organisations, companies, and foundations. Even some civilians who are not linked to the Gulen movement have been purged or arrested because they had deposited money in Bank Asya, a bank associated with Gulen.

After the coup attempt of the Gulen movement, many media outlets and associations were shut down. Journalists from a range of media organisations were imprisoned because they allegedly insulted the head of state or have links to terrorist organisations such as FETO ("Gulenist Terrorist Movement" in Turkish) and the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party, in Turkish). The oldest up-market newspaper in Turkey, *Cumhuriyet*, which has subscribed to secular, republican discourse, has been suppressed by the government. *Cumhuriyet* was known to be the newspaper of Kemalists (those supporting the early nationalist movement of the first President of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, also known as Atatürk, or "Father of the Turks") who strictly object to the Gulen movement and the PKK. After operations performed by the police, the government detained the editor and some staff working for *Cumhuriyet*. Overall, it is claimed that at least 81 journalists have been imprisoned in Turkey, which is extremely problematic when it comes to the issue of freedom of press.

The CHP, the Republican People's Party, is one of the oldest political parties in Turkey. It is a Kemalist social-democratic party that stands in opposition to Erdogan's religious party, the Justice and Development Party, or AKP. The CHP claims that the decree laws and the state of emergency may give the public clues as to how Turkey will fare if the referendum results in expanding Erdogan's executive powers. Cetin Osman Budak, Vice President of the CHP, told Turkish media that the recent state of emergency may be indicative of what Erdogan might be able to do with his expanded authority after the referendum, and that there will be nobody to stop him signing decree laws in the future.

It is worth noting that Erdogan's AKP is not the only party backing these constitutional changes. The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is known to be a Euro-skeptic and anti-Western party, also supports the constitutional change. Without the MHP's votes, the parliament would not be able to approve the constitutional changes increasing executive powers. Relatedly, it is also interesting to see what has happened within the MHP in recent years; Devlet Bahçeli, the chairman of the MHP, has been the leader of the party for 20 years. Even though the opposition within the party demanded a party-wide congress to elect a new leader and collected enough number of signatures last

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year to achieve that, it is claimed that the Turkish Minister of Justice has stopped such a congress, which would displace Bahçeli and could thereby change the MHP's stance on the constitutional referendum.

The debates regarding constitutional change in Turkey will have a direct impact on the Turkish democracy. The referendum will be held in April. Some fear that, if passed, it will cause a slide toward authoritarianism within Turkey. Erdogan and supporters see it as a needed response to the coup attempt and subsequent internal challenges to the Turkish state. Yet, one can suggest that Turkey's state of emergency may continue indefinitely if Turks approve the constitutional change expanding executive powers within the Turkish state.

About the author:

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