

The Turkish Referendum and Its Impact on Turkey's Foreign Policy

Written by Md. Muddassir Quamar

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MD. MUDDASSIR QUAMAR, MAY 22 2017

On April 16, 2017, a referendum on the constitutional amendment bill to change the form of government in Turkey to presidential system was approved by a 51.4 percent votes. The proposed change will come into effect in 2019. The amendment with 18 clauses makes a significant change in the way Turkey's government will function. It grants extraordinary powers to the president including appointment of judges in the highest judicial body and power to call for fresh elections. Although there is a provision that the legislature can overrule the president on constitutional matters, decision making – including foreign policy matters – has largely been conferred to the presidency. The debate over the proposed changes, since its approval by the National Assembly in January 2017 has witnessed sharp political divisions in Turkey. Opposition groups and international observers have accused President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of authoritarian and anti-democratic behavior. Interestingly, the restrictions on two terms for an individual will start afresh in 2019, providing Erdoğan two new terms as president. This would mean that if he wins the next two presidential elections (expected in 2019 and 2024) then he would rule the country until 2029.

It is in this context that Turkey faces serious foreign policy challenges, especially in its relations with the European Union (EU), the US, Russia and the neighboring countries in the Middle East. The domestic situation has been volatile in the last few months with the recent spate of terror attacks and stark divisions within the polity. The run up to the referendum also witnessed sharp exchanges between President Erdoğan and his ministers and politicians in the Netherlands and Germany – countries having a significant Turkish diaspora. Erdoğan was looking for diaspora votes and the ruling party, AKP wanted to aggressively campaign amongst them. But they were not allowed to do so which led to strains in the relations between Turkey and the EU.

In fact, Turkey's relations with the EU have deteriorated sharply in the recent past, especially since the emergence of the refugee crisis and the EU's reluctance on Turkey's accession bid. As a response, Turkey has adopted an aggressive stance on its accession. The Turkish President has, on several occasions, even said that more than Turkey needs the EU, the EU needs Turkey. The EU-Turkey relations have deteriorated to the extent that the European Parliament voted to suspend negotiations with Turkey for EU membership in November 2016 on the issue of deteriorating human rights in the Turkey. Even after the referendum, dramatic turnaround in EU-Turkey relations is not expected. Turkey's aggressive posture and EU's continued denial of membership is expected to continue. If Turkey's backsliding on democratization continues it will further strengthen those in the EU who advocate termination of accession negotiations with Turkey.

Secondly, Turkey's relationship with the US has also been changing. The US and Turkey, despite being NATO allies, no longer share a comprehensive policy convergence. The relationship has changed and now reached a level where both parties are thinking in terms of issue-based understanding. This is visible in the case of Syria where the US supports and has continued to arm the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). It is an important member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is a US-backed loose coalition force fighting against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and also resisting the Syrian regime forces. Turkey, on the other hand, accuses YPG of sheltering and being a branch of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) that it has been leading an insurgency in southeastern Turkey. Both the US and Turkey recognize PKK as a terrorist group but Turkey sees YPG as an extension of the PKK and hence, is opposed to the US support of it.

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Turkish forces have on several occasions, most recently on April 25 attacked YPG targets in northern Syria. The issue has led to serious differences between the US and Turkey. Recently, after President Trump approved the arming of YPG on May 9, President Erdoğan reacted sharply and said that "I hope very much that this mistake will be reversed immediately."

The changing nature of Turkey's relationship with EU and the US has led to a situation where Turkey is developing cordial relations with Russia on the Syrian crisis. They have come a long way from the shooting down of Russian Su-24 warplane by Turkey in November 2015 to agreeing to oversee, along with Iran, the creation of safe-zones to "further pacification and cessation of hostilities" in the war torn Syria in early May 2017. After Erdoğan publicly apologised for the shooting down of the Russian warplane in July 2016, Russia and Turkey have worked on resetting their ties including the differences over position in Syria, work towards creating possibilities to end the civil war, pave way for possible negotiations between the regime and rebels and find a political solution to the problem. The first major breakthrough among Russia-Iran-Turkey was achieved as the battle in Aleppo was coming to a close in December 2016.

The fall of Aleppo significantly tilted the crisis in favor of the Assad regime but talks between Turkey and Russia-Iran prevented a complete liquidation of the rebels. The three since then have led the efforts towards finding a solution to the crisis through Astana talks and have been successful in bringing down the casualties and creating conditions in which the regime and various rebel forces can begin to negotiate. However, the real test will be in accommodating the concerns of the Syrian Kurds who wish to formalize the de facto Kurdish autonomous zone (Rojava) in northern Syria in any future settlement. This is unacceptable to Turkey as it considers such an autonomous zone a major problem that will bolster the PKK in Turkey and give credence to their secessionist demands. The issue will continue to test Russia-Turkey relations but might lead to a situation where Turkey accepts an Iraq-like arrangement depending on the Syrian Kurds abandoning the PKK.

Another significant aspect of Turkey's foreign policy is its relationship with the countries in the Middle East. Turkey under the AKP has been accused of harboring neo-Ottoman, expansionist tendencies. It was evident in the way Turkey aggressively positioned itself as a model for the Arab and Muslim world, especially in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. This attitude led to serious differences with Syria, Iraq and Egypt after the removal of President Mohamed Morsi. The Arab Spring seriously exposed Turkey's *Zero Problem* doctrine. Turkey's foreign policy challenges run deeper than its troubled relationship with EU and West Asian neighbors. Erdoğan's Turkey faces serious scrutiny over relations with several international players and these relationships have been handled clumsily leading to serious foreign policy problems. In fact, Erdoğan's aggressive posture against the regional and global actors such as Israel and China, in addition to his tendency of negative political rhetoric such as against EU and India has seriously dented Turkey's international standing.

The referendum results have confirmed a change in Turkey's political system and has, in the views of Erdoğan's critics, formalized an 'authoritarian one-man' rule. While the shift might have larger consequences for the domestic politics, foreign policy implications will also be substantial. Erdoğan sees a significant place for Turkey in world politics and wishes to extend its influence in what he regards as Turkey's natural sphere of influence, that is, the erstwhile Ottoman territories. Turkey's desire to play a larger role in the Middle East and global affairs but ineptitude in actualizing it poses a serious challenge for its foreign policy in the coming years.

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