

Turkey's 'New Sultan'

Prospects for Future U.S. and Regional Policy

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Apr 21, 2017

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Brief Analysis

Read a summary or watch video of an in-depth conversation regarding Turkey's recent referendum, which has further consolidated Erdogan's hold on power but also signaled deep internal divisions.

On April 18, Soner Cagaptay, Gonul Tol, and Amberin Zaman addressed a Policy Forum book launch event at The Washington Institute. Cagaptay, the Institute's Beyer Family Fellow and director of its Turkish Research Program, just published his latest book [The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey](#)

(<https://www.newsultant.info/>). Tol is the founding director of the Middle East Institute's Center for Turkish Studies. Zaman is a writer for Al-Monitor and a Public Policy Fellow in the Wilson Center's Middle East Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SONER CAGAPTA

The New Sultan tracks Turkey's polarization by chronicling Recep Tayyip Erdogan's consolidation of power, first as prime minister and then as president. After a decade and a half in office, he has become the most unassailable Turkish leader since Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. But while half the country loves him, the other half loathes him. Erdogan now wants to shape Turkey in his own image as Ataturk once did, funneling state resources into top-down social engineering (e.g., using education policy to influence young Turks).

Despite sharing Ataturk's methods, however, Erdogan does not share his values. Ataturk established a secular, European, Westernized state, but Erdogan wants a country that is Middle Eastern, conservative, and politically Islamist. The challenge is that while Ataturk came to power as a military general, Erdogan has needed a popular mandate to govern -- at least until the April 16 constitutional referendum, in which the unfairness of the campaign environment and large-scale irregularities in ballots have called his mandate into question. Yet rather than entertaining doubts about the results, Erdogan has decided to push ahead, declaring himself omnipotent president. This questionable mandate will only exacerbate Turkey's deep societal polarization.

The New Sultan argues that Erdogan probably cannot impose his vision in full because Turkey is a melange of social, political, ethnic, and religious groups, quite a few of which oppose his agenda. In particular, many of Turkey's coastal cities (which represent a majority of the country's GDP) voted against the referendum. Erdogan even lost in his hometown of Istanbul, including his own neighborhood. Overall, a near majority of Turks voted no -- perhaps even more if the reported electoral irregularities prove large enough. Turkey has simply become too diverse demographically, too big economically, and too complicated politically for one person to shape in his own image.

For example, despite Erdogan's efforts to create a class of crony Islamist capitalists, the bulk of the country's wealth is still aligned with the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TUSIAD), which is wedded to secular, democratic, liberal, and European values. Similarly, Turkey will soon become the first Muslim-majority country to achieve universal literacy, diluting the effects of Erdogan's overwhelming media control and his devotion of massive state resources to the pre-referendum "yes" campaign. The question now is whether Turkey's wider right wing, which traditionally polls at around 60 percent, can provide an alternative to Erdogan.

Turkey seems to have three possible trajectories moving forward. First, the current state of crisis could continue, with the pro-Erdogan half of the country believing they live in heaven and the anti-Erdogan half thinking hell. Second, if Erdogan realizes that he cannot continue governing in his current fashion as long as the country is genuinely democratic, he might decide to become autocratic enough to end democracy in Turkey. A third, more remote possibility is that deep internal polarization -- coupled with further terrorist attacks by the Islamic State and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) or nefarious activities by neighbors like the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran -- could catapult Turkey into civil conflict.

Whatever the case, Russia's role as Erdogan's nemesis seems assured. Moscow's support for the PKK-aligned People's Defense Units (YPG) in Syria threatens Turkish security interests. For his part, Vladimir Putin believes Ankara's brand of Sunni political Islam could politicize and radicalize his own Muslim minority, which constitutes 15-20 percent of Russia's population and has deep ethnic and historical ties to Turkey.

Yet the possibility of greater tensions with Moscow does not mean Turkey will return to the West's bosom. Foreign policy has become a subset of Erdogan's domestic agenda, and his followers made the EU a prime punching bag in the run-up to the referendum. This hard nationalist line will probably extend to U.S. cooperation with the YPG as well.

The voting results also demonstrated that Turkey's Nationalist Action Party (MHP) is splitting: its conservative central and northeastern Anatolian voters are flocking to Erdogan, but its coastal and urban voters are splintering

off. To permanently secure the central and northeastern supporters, he will presumably maintain an ultranationalist stance on foreign policy issues. In the longer term, however, he will probably seek to weaken the MHP such that it falls below the 10 percent electoral threshold for entry to parliament.

On the domestic policy front, Erdogan has called for restoration of capital punishment. If this happens, Turkey would be kicked out of the Council of Europe, meaning Turkish citizens would no longer have access to the European Court of Human Rights to arbitrate disputes.

There remains a fourth possible trajectory, one that excludes Erdogan but is driven by his achievements. He has made Turkey a middle-class society, so citizens are now making very middle-class demands for a liberal Turkey. Yet the opposition remains divided and lacks a charismatic leader. Until someone emerges who can effectively make the case for a liberal state -- one that provides freedom of religion for one half of the country and freedom from religion for the other half, as well as unfettered liberties for all citizens, including Kurds -- Turkey's future remains worrisome.

GONUL TOL

The first question that comes to mind in reading *The New Sultan* is: Which sultan? Sunday's referendum indicates that many Turks could live with Suleiman the Magnificent, who was a reformer, but what about Sultan Abdulhamid, who was a truly authoritarian ruler?

The book does a great job of opening a window into Erdogan's psyche. And by recounting his personal narrative -- a narrative of victimhood, which resonates with his constituency and beyond -- it shows the interplay between the republic's founding Kemalist ideology and subsequent reactions to it.

Turkey is now in a post-Kemalist, post-Islamist era, and one would expect it to embrace liberal values as a reaction to the authoritarianism of the preceding ideologies. Yet Turkey's growing middle class is not demanding middle-class values. Instead, authoritarianism is on the rise, perhaps due to the inherent character of Turkish political culture. Some might criticize this as an essentialist argument, but it stems from the original sin of statist ideology. The state occupies a very unique place in the Turkish psyche; it is often given credit for developing the economy and rebuilding the bourgeoisie. As a result, the middle class is aligning with Erdogan's authoritarian policies rather than standing up to them.

In this sense, the people who voted for the constitutional change were not voting in favor of authoritarianism, they were simply saying they did not mind it. Last year's failed coup handed Erdogan this victory of sorts because it reenergized his narrative of victimhood.

Yet the razor-thin margin of victory means that electoral politics will continue to play an important role in Erdogan's ability to implement his agenda. His main strategy for the referendum was to galvanize the nationalist vote, but this approach did not fully pay off. Interestingly, the results indicate that he has increased his support in the Kurdish region, which could spur him to return the favor by recalibrating his strategy and working with the Kurds. This would be good news domestically, likely improving the economy and security conditions. It would also create more room for Ankara to maneuver in Syria.

While knowing that Erdogan is a pragmatic leader gives some cause for hope, he has also been in power for so long that he has become the state himself. The resultant infusion of statist ideology will likely be an increasingly prominent driver in his decisionmaking, perhaps at the expense of pragmatism.

AMBERIN ZAMAN

The referendum's results were not definitive in either direction. Given the assumption that Erdogan would win, the final outcome was the least-bad scenario -- his bare majority does not grant him a popular mandate for doing

whatever he wishes, and for now he is still saddled with the responsibility of governing. The new constitutional provisions do not kick in until November 3, 2019, so the uncertainties of the interim period will weigh heavily on his mind.

For one, his loss in Istanbul indicates a certain inefficacy in his grassroots organization. Accordingly, once he is invited to lead the party once more, he will likely shake things up, generating a fresh batch of disgruntled former allies. These outcasts could coalesce around Meral Aksener, who is challenging the MHP leadership at the moment. In the end, though, the forces aligned against Erdogan are unlikely to unite under one banner.

More broadly, the legitimacy of Turkish democracy is under serious question for the first time since the 1980 coup. The international press is focusing on irregularities and fraud in the referendum vote, frequently citing criticisms issued by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Against this backdrop, Erdogan will likely continue instrumentalizing foreign policy, which does not bode well for relations with the United States or EU. To deflect attention from the election, he may embark on ill-advised cross-border adventures such as attacking Tal Abyad or Sinjar. As long as Washington's top priority there is defeating the Islamic State, relations with Ankara will remain tense because the YPG is the best partner for that goal.

Another important bilateral issue is the case of Reza Zarrab, an Azeri-Turkish-Iranian gold trader who was arrested for violating U.S. sanctions on Tehran. Previously, he was implicated in an extensive corruption scandal that erupted in December 2013, with some accusing Erdogan's family of involvement as well.

Yet the referendum results are also a testament to the strength of Turkish civil society. Despite the tremendous obstacles that Erdogan has arrayed before the opposition -- including the imprisonment of most every journalist who might have best articulated the case against the referendum, along with thousands of Kurdish politicians -- his victory was thin and highly contested. This shows that Turkish society is maturing, and people are taking individual responsibility instead of relying on the army to fight the fight. All is not over for Turkish democracy; it remains a work in progress.

This summary was prepared by Oya Aktas.



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