

Turkey in Crisis

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Without an organized opposition, Erdogan's expanded powers may end Turkish democracy.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's narrow win in Sunday's referendum, which significantly expands his powers, is not promising for Turkey's future. Following the referendum, Erdogan has become the most powerful Turk since Mustafa Kemal Ataturk founded modern Turkey in 1923. But while half of the country loves Erdogan, the other half loathes him: Herein lies Turkey's crisis.

Erdogan's populist brand of politics is the cause of this polarization. Prime minister of Turkey between 2003 and 2014 and president since, Erdogan has demonized and cracked down on constituencies, ranging from Kurds and social democrats to leftists and liberals, that are not likely to vote for him in order to boost his right-wing, Islamist and nationalist base.

Coupled with strong economic growth, Erdogan's electoral strategy has created deeply entrenched polarization in Turkey: His conservative supporters, constituting about half of the country, have zealously rallied around him in his defense; the other half of the country, brutalized by Erdogan, holds a profound resentment for him. Increasingly, there is little common ground between these constituencies.

Although he has won elections democratically (until Sunday's vote), Erdogan has gradually become more autocratic, ensuring little by little that the political playing field is uneven in order to prevent power from escaping his hands. In its [preliminary report \(https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/311721?download=true\)](https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/311721?download=true) covering Sunday's Turkish referendum, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a European body that does election monitoring, said that provincial governors impinged on "fundamental rights and freedoms" by using "extraordinary state of emergency powers," declared by Erdogan in the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup, to restrict "freedom of assembly and expression."

The Turkish opposition has taken the election outcome to the courts, also asking the country's election board to annul the referendum. But the Turkish institutions are notoriously conservative when it comes to annulling elections or overturning their outcomes. As far as Erdogan and his supporters are concerned, the race is over. Next, he will move to shape Turkey in his own image, taking his cue from Ataturk, the country's founder whom Erdogan wants to both emulate and replace.

In the early 20th century, Ataturk established modern Turkey as a secular, European, Westernized state. He funneled state resources into top-down social engineering, especially education policy, to shape young Turks in his own image. Now, Erdogan wants to use his own power to shape Turkey in his own mold, as a country that is Middle Eastern, conservative and politically Islamist, and to this end, he aims to use Ataturk's top-down Jacobin methods.

But Erdogan has a problem: Whereas Ataturk came to power as a military general, Erdogan has had a democratic mandate to govern. Furthermore, Turkey is split down the middle between pro- and anti-Erdogan camps.

It is unlikely that Erdogan will be able to impose his vision of political Islam on the whole of Turkish society, a melange of social, political, ethnic and religious groups, many of whom oppose Erdogan's agenda: In Sunday's referendum, many of the cities along the country's coast voted in overwhelming numbers against Erdogan. The Turkish leader even lost his hometown of Istanbul, the country's commercial capital.

Turkey has simply become too diverse demographically, too big economically and too complicated politically for one person to shape it in his own image. Despite Erdogan's efforts to create a class of crony Islamist capitalists, for instance, the bulk of the country's wealth is still aligned with TUSIAD, Turkey's Fortune 500 club, which is wedded to secular, democratic, pro-Western and liberal values. So long as Turkey is genuinely democratic, Erdogan cannot continue to govern the way he likes, which is why he will become more autocratic going forward. He could even end democracy in Turkey.

There is another, less grim trajectory for Turkey -- one that includes Erdogan's opposition. However, this alternative may be a tall order. At the moment, the anti-Erdogan camp is a loose coalition including Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, seculars and conservatives, Sunnis (who are orthodox Muslims) and Alevis (who are liberal Muslims), among others.

The gap between those opposition factions is often wider than the gap separating them from Erdogan. Another problem for the opposition is that while Erdogan has become an anti-Ataturk "Ataturk," shaping the country in his own conservative and Islamist image -- ironically, the legacy of Ataturk continues to influence the strategies of the new "Ataturk" -- the opposition's Ataturk (that is, the real Ataturk) is, of course, dead.

To coalesce in a viable alternative to Erdogan, Turkey's future opposition movement will have to bring together the peaceful wing of the Kurdish-nationalist movement, secular Turks, anti-Erdogan nationalist Turks and the center-right wing of conservative Turks under its own "Ataturk," a charismatic leader with a unifying and -- at least in principle -- liberal Weltanschauung. Such a leader has yet to emerge, and he or she must appear sooner than later in order to prevent Erdogan from completely ending democracy in Turkey.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of the new book [The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey](https://www.newsultan.info/) (<https://www.newsultan.info/>). ❖

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