

Erdogan's Nationalist Path to a Full Presidential System

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Brief Analysis

By further hardening his approach toward Kurdish nationalism at home and in Syria, Erdogan hopes to woo Turkish ultranationalists and legally enshrine his executive power, but his efforts could clash with U.S. policy on the war next door.

On May 20, the Turkish parliament approved a bill that paves the way for lifting the legislative immunity enjoyed by deputies facing criminal charges. The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) sponsored the legislation in an apparent bid to target deputies from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Moreover, the AKP banded with deputies from the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in order to push the vote through, signaling the short-term political direction for conservative Islamist president Recep Tayyip Erdogan: a pivot to ultranationalism.

If pursued further, this trajectory could put Turkey at odds with its own Kurdish community, breed domestic instability, and drive a wedge between Ankara and Washington, which relies on Syrian Kurdish groups to fight the Islamic State (IS). Erdogan's pivot will also complicate U.S. efforts to unify Cyprus.

EXPELLING PRO-KURDISH DEPUTIES?

Although the new legislation could technically apply to deputies from all parties, Erdogan has already suggested singling out the parliament's HDP deputies, fifty of whom are facing charges for their alleged connection to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), considered a terrorist entity by Turkey, NATO, and Washington. As the vote was taking place, he warned HDP members that "my nation does not want to see terror supporters in the parliament." Now that the law has passed, he can start the legal process leading to their expulsion if he so chooses.

Whatever the merits behind the HDP's alleged links to the PKK, the president has ample political reasons to target the party. Despite Erdogan's growing formal and informal powers, including continued de facto control over the AKP,

the country remains a parliamentary system, and he has used up all of his legally permissible terms as prime minister. Therefore, he has focused on transforming Turkey into an executive system ever since becoming president in 2014. To do so, he needs the ability to amend the constitution, which in turn requires a large parliamentary majority.

There are two ways to amend the constitution: through a two-thirds majority in parliament (i.e., 367 of the 550 deputies voting in favor) or a three-fifths majority (330 votes). In the latter case, the amendment would also need to pass a popular referendum. Currently, the AKP has 317 deputies in the legislature, after winning successive elections on a platform of economic good governance, conservative values, and Islamist foreign policy. Yet voting tallies and poll results from the past few years indicate that the party has maxed out its electoral support with this platform, so Erdogan must shift his approach to reach either of the thresholds for amending the constitution.

Enter the MHP. By courting the nationalist party and its forty seats, threatening legal action against the rival HDP, and widening the AKP's own popular base through this and other ultranationalist moves, Erdogan could help his party gain the majority it needs -- whether in the current parliament, through early elections, or in a public referendum. Such an outcome would also effectively sideline Turkey's main opposition faction, the secular-leftist Republican People's Party (CHP), which currently holds 133 seats.

In addition, Erdogan seeks a constitutional amendment to overturn the presidency's traditionally nonpartisan status, which would allow him to claim official leadership over the AKP. He no doubt hopes to avoid the fate that befell two past leaders, Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel, who also aimed for the presidency and abandoned their powerful parties only to see them implode in subsequent parliamentary elections. Making the presidency a partisan position would help Erdogan actively prevent his party from fracturing and further consolidate power. He already took a step in this direction on May 5, when he orchestrated the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and replaced him with a much more malleable figure. In short, if Erdogan's faction gains the seats needed to pass constitutional amendments unhindered, he would be Turkey's head of state, head of its ruling party, and de facto head of government all at the same time.

SECURING MHP SUPPORT IN THE LEGISLATURE

In the short term, should Erdogan use his legal power to expel HDP deputies, he will find strong support from the MHP's right-wing legislators and voters. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli will be a particularly loyal partner. He faces rising dissent inside his party, including a contested call by some delegates to replace him at a party convention. In what appeared to be politically motivated injunctions, lower courts blocked the most recent MHP convention, allowing Bahçeli to stay in power for now; Turkish police under the Interior Ministry's control actually prevented party dissidents from holding a vote to pick a new leader. Because he owes his political survival to Erdogan, Bahçeli will likely support any constitutional amendments to make the presidency a partisan post.

POACHING VOTERS, EARLY ELECTIONS, AND WOOING THE MILITARY

In the longer term, if either of Erdogan's desired constitutional amendments requires a popular referendum, he will likely have to rely on winning over MHP voters to get it passed. For the time being, that may mean continuing his hardline stance against the PKK as long as he deems it politically necessary. Ankara launched peace talks with the group in 2013, but they collapsed last summer when PKK members executed two off-duty police officers. Since then, Erdogan has abandoned his previous support for the talks and turned hawkish against the group and the broader Kurdish nationalist movement.

Besides legal action, pivoting to nationalism gives him other means of targeting the pro-Kurdish HDP and building a

supermajority in parliament. The HDP's popularity has been waning due to PKK attacks, and if Erdogan senses that the party will fail the 10 percent threshold necessary for representation in parliament, he could call for early elections. The AKP and HDP are the only parties currently capable of garnering significant Kurdish votes in southeastern Turkey, so if the HDP fails to reach the threshold, the AKP would likely pick up 40-50 of its seats, coming within reach of an outright two-thirds majority.

Last but not least, a nationalist pivot could help Erdogan regain the military's confidence. This will be a tall hurdle, however -- the armed forces take a dim view of his political agenda and hold a grudge against him over the 2007-2012 Ergenekon trials, in which questionable evidence of an alleged coup was used to prosecute and imprison hundreds of top officers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

Erdogan's embrace of nationalist rhetoric and actions could have important repercussions on Turkish foreign policy. For one thing, it should be noted that the last time pro-Kurdish deputies were expelled from parliament (1994), it led to the country's worst round of multiyear fighting with the PKK. More than 2,100 citizens and security personnel died in 1994 alone.

Second, Ankara will likely take a less enthusiastic stance on Cyprus unification talks, if only to placate nationalist voters. This could complicate Washington's overall policy on Cyprus, and especially Vice President Joe Biden's efforts to bring the unification effort to fruition.

Third, Erdogan's pivot might bring him into conflict with U.S. policy in Syria. His tough stance on the PKK and its ongoing terrorist attacks -- including two suicide bombings in Ankara in February-March, which killed at least fifty-seven people -- have further soured Turkish views of the group and its Syrian ally, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). President Obama has been relying on the PYD's military wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG), to fight Islamic State forces in Syria, but most Turks oppose any arrangements that allow the group to make territorial gains -- even if these gains are made by pushing back against IS, another organization that has attacked Turkish cities recently. If Erdogan further hardens his approach toward the PKK and, by extension, the PYD/YPG, Washington will need to be even more careful about deconflicting U.S. and Turkish efforts in Syria.

At the same time, however, the Turkish leader's recent foreign policy missteps will force him not to alienate Washington completely. Turkey shot down a Russian plane in November, and Moscow has essentially encircled the country with troops in Crimea to the north, Syria to the south, and Armenia to the east, so Ankara once again needs the United States as a bulwark against its historic nemesis.

Returning to peace talks with the PKK could defuse Ankara's tensions with the PYD almost instantly, but that is unlikely to happen before Erdogan changes the Turkish constitution with the goal of becoming an omnipotent president. At that point he could step back from his nationalist stance, but until then his shifting policies will create potential risks that the United States should monitor closely.

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