

Will President Erdogan Run Turkey?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Erdogan has the political and constitutional wherewithal to transform Turkey into a presidential system, and he will likely do just that.

On August 10, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been running the country since 2002, won the presidential election with 52 percent of the popular vote. Under Turkey's current parliamentary system, the prime minister is the chief executive and head of government, while the president is the nonpartisan head of state and second in line with regard to executive powers. Yet on August 4, Erdogan hinted that "he will not assume the traditional role of the president in Turkish politics," adding that he "will track all the issues and make sure that the cabinet [which includes the prime minister] and the other institutions work in accord." Can Erdogan run the country from his new post? An analysis of Turkey's constitution and political structure suggests that is likely, with implications for U.S.-Turkish relations on a variety of regional issues.

THE PRESIDENCY UNDER THE CONSTITUTION

Prior to a 2007 constitutional amendment, Turkey's parliament was tasked with choosing the president -- yesterday's vote marked the first time the post was directly elected by the people. This switch notwithstanding, Turkey's political system has long had an unusually strong presidency compared to most other parliamentary democracies. Unlike in Germany, for instance, where the president plays a largely ceremonial role, the Turkish president has significant powers, including the prerogative to slow down legislation passed by the parliament, appoint judges to high courts, and chair the National Security Council (NSC). The president also has the power, rarely exercised by previous heads of state, to "call the cabinet of ministers meetings and to lead such meetings the way he or she sees fit," as stipulated by Article 104 of the constitution.

This strong presidency is a product of a tumultuous period that unfolded more than three decades ago, when stalemate between parties in the legislature led to economic collapse in 1979 and a coup in 1980. To prevent a similar meltdown, the drafters of Turkey's current constitution strengthened the presidency in 1982, allowing the

head of state to interfere in the political system if necessary to break future stalemates. Yet the parliamentary system worked smoothly in the 1980s and 1990s, with no need for such intervention. Presidents remained mostly ceremonial figures, allowing the prime ministers to run the country. After the AKP's rise in 2002, President Ahmet Sezer interfered often to slow down AKP legislation. But in 2007, AKP member Abdullah Gul was elected president, and the prime minister once again took the fore.

PRESIDENT ERDOGAN'S MODUS OPERANDI

Given this weekend's results, Erdogan could push Turkey toward a system in which the president assumes the role of chief executive, appointing a prime minister to run the cabinet for him. Erdogan is Turkey's most powerful politician, having governed the country for twelve years, longer than any other democratically elected leader. A prime minister appointed by President Erdogan would most certainly report to him rather than work with him.

Erdogan also has the legal and informal channels of power that would allow him to act as chief executive. As mentioned above, the Turkish constitution already grants the president significant powers:

- *Chairing NSC meetings.* Previously a power center dominated by the military, the NSC was transformed following a 2003 constitutional amendment passed by the AKP, which changed the body's composition from majority military to majority civilian. At the same time, the NSC fell from prominence in the policymaking process as Prime Minister Erdogan took the helm, driving Turkey's policy on foreign and domestic security issues alike (e.g., involvement in Syria, peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party). As president, Erdogan could use his constitutionally sanctioned control over the NSC to restore its role as a key body in defining Turkey's foreign and domestic policy.
- *Chairing cabinet meetings.* By exercising his constitutional right to lead cabinet sessions, President Erdogan could continue to run the country's daily business, particularly if he pushes for a "Putin-Medvedev model" in which he appoints the prime minister reporting to him. To be sure, Article 101 of the constitution stipulates that the president cannot have a party affiliation, so Erdogan will have to weather the risky move of resigning from the AKP. Thus far, he has kept a tight rein on the party by using his strong personality and his longstanding position as AKP chairman. Yet in 1989 and 1993, two broad right-wing coalitions similar to the AKP and also held together by dominant leaders -- Turgut Ozal and Suleyman Demirel, respectively -- imploded when these strong leaders abandoned their party posts to become president. To avoid that outcome, Erdogan may decide to keep the AKP's reins in his hands informally by attending cabinet meetings regularly.
- *Exercising parliamentary powers.* Article 104 of the constitution gives the president the power to "call the parliament into session when necessary." And as seen during Sezer's tenure, President Erdogan could also slow down and veto legislation under the same article. If he chose to exercise these powers, Erdogan would likely rely on his ability to exert pressure by the sheer force of his personality. He is both feared and respected by the AKP cadres and will likely retain significant influence over them -- including the AKP majority in parliament -- even after he leaves the party.

It is all but certain that Erdogan will use his strong personality and constitutional powers to continue running the government as president. He has already pointed to heavy executive involvement, stating on August 4 that it "may not be enough" for him "to meet the prime minister once a week" as previous presidents have done, suggesting more frequent contacts. His remarks about the constitution also implied that he will seek a paramount role: "Article 104 of the constitution says that the president is the head of state, and that is it." Finally, he will no doubt seek additional legitimacy in the fact that he has been elected to the presidency by popular vote, a first in Turkey's history.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

Armed with the results of a landmark popular vote, liberally interpreted constitutional powers, and the fear and respect of the AKP-majority parliament, Erdogan is poised to single-handedly run the country as president. This suggests a strong Erdogan-defined tinge in Turkish politics going forward, and in U.S.-Turkish relations. The new

president will likely agitate for more U.S. assistance to the Syrian rebels. He will seek U.S. assistance to bolster the Iraqi Kurds in their political struggles with the Baghdad government. And he will prioritize securing the release of Turkish hostages seized by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) over short-term military action that could provoke the group.

At the same time, though, Erdogan will have more room to cooperate with the United States on politically sensitive issues such as Turkey's ties with Armenia and Israel. In fact, he will likely launch a charm offensive toward Washington on issues near and dear to U.S. policymakers, restoring friendly relations with President Obama in order to secure U.S. assistance that can shield Turkey from instability in Syria and Iraq. Since he will control key levers of power, the U.S. government will have to deal with him on core issues more frequently, often skipping the traditional channels of bureaucracy and other key personalities.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac Books). ❖

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