

Turkey's Choice

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Articles & Testimony

Had I voted in Sunday's referendum in Turkey, I would have struggled to decide whether to vote for or against the constitutional amendments put forth by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

On the one hand, the reform package includes progressive amendments, such as constitutionally guaranteed gender equality. On the other hand, it grants the AKP the power to appoint most of Turkey's high court judges without a confirmation process. Prior to Sunday, the secular courts were the last remaining check on the power of the AKP -- an authoritarian movement with Islamist roots that has often interpreted democracy as unchallenged majority rule. That judicial check is now gone.

With the amendments now passed, the AKP promises to draft a new constitution for Turkey. But regardless of the laws and amendments that Ankara passes, the question remains whether the AKP will actually transform the country into a liberal democracy.

Since assuming power in 2002, the AKP has accused Turkey's courts and its secular military of undemocratically blocking its initiatives, and thus of inhibiting the country's emergence as a liberal democracy. The party has now jettisoned both these institutions: Following allegations of a coup plot involving military officers, the Turkish military has withdrawn to its barracks. And after Sunday's referendum, the courts, too, will be reshaped in the image of the conservative-cum-Islamist AKP.

The party has also steadily built up the influence it wields over the country's powerful -- and largely secular -- media and business community. Recently, the AKP slammed independent press outlets with politically motivated taxes and fines, forcing more-compliant coverage of government policies. In the run-up to elections, AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to destroy the secular business lobbies should they fail to support the amendments in the referendum. The result? The amendments passed, with 58% of the vote.

So after eight years of hard work, the stars have finally aligned in the AKP's favor: The party is in nearly complete control of all three branches of government and is able to coerce the fourth estate largely as it pleases. For the first time since 2002, the AKP is not only governing, but is also holding the reins of power effectively unchecked. What is more, although the AKP has received a plurality of the vote in previous polls, Sept. 12 marked the first time the party garnered majority support. Now begins the real test of where the AKP wants to take Turkey.

The AKP is making a lot of feel-good promises for the new constitution it will now draft. Beyond the sound bites and even the laws, though, it is even more important for the outside world to monitor developments on the ground in Turkey, in determining whether the groundwork for a truly liberal society is being laid.

Take, for instance, the gender-equality article that Turks voted to insert in the new constitution. While passing such a progressive amendment is certainly positive, it is in stark contrast to previous AKP actions, which routinely exclude women from power.

Consider that although women comprise 40% of Turkey's teachers, the top 27 bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education are all men. The ministries of agriculture, environment, energy, transportation, public works, and health

also lack female appointees among over 35 executive posts, comprising advisors, directors general, counselors, legal counselors, undersecretaries and deputy undersecretaries. This, despite the fact that 35% of all engineers and 30% of all doctors in Turkey are women. Clearly, drafting a liberal democratic constitution is not enough; the rest of the world must also watch to see whether the AKP it is actually practicing the liberal democracy it preaches.

Now that it has gained full control of all political levers, the AKP might choose to continue interpreting democracy as the right to ignore minority opinion while carrying out illiberal policies, using elections to periodically justify its iron rule. Dismissing its opposition -- which on Sunday amounted to 42% of Turks, or the roughly 32 million people who voted against the referendum -- would be the easy way forward for the AKP. Recent trends, including the government's efforts to shut down independent media; its ubiquitous wiretaps; and its tendency to accuse anyone who challenges the party of plotting coups against the government, all point in this direction.

But giving space to its opposition and interpreting democracy as a pluralistic, consensus-building system will, in the long run, better serve the AKP, because it will better serve the country. Secular Turkey is simply too large for the AKP to ignore or suppress. Opinion polls suggest that over 30 million Turks would never support the AKP or resolve to live in a country shaped solely by its values. Should the AKP choose to rule without compromise, it risks tearing Turkey apart.

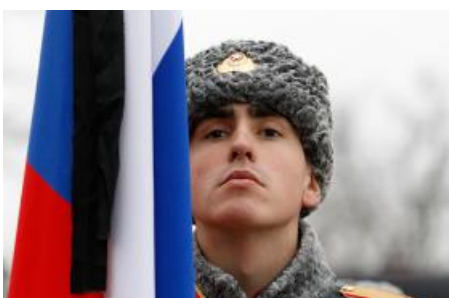
So once the AKP finishes basking in its victory, it must develop a vision of a new Turkey that is for everyone: Muslim and non-Muslim, religious and non-religious, man and woman, Islamist and secularist alike. For its own sake, the AKP should draft a truly liberal constitution, which will require a degree of consensus. The sad alternative would be a Turkey that not only looks like Russia in its "democracy," but is also dangerously torn between the leadership and its opponents. Given that Turkish polls are known to be peaceful affairs, the violence that broke out between AKP supporters and opponents leading up to the referendum is a warning sign that must be heeded.

That goes for leaders outside Turkey just as much as inside. Turkey has been a key ally to the U.S. and maintaining that relationship is crucial to success of Washington's policies toward Muslim countries, including Turkey's neighbors, Iran, Iraq and Syria. So too would Europe do better to bring this Islamic majority country into its fold than leave it to the likes of Iran and Syria. But can the AKP, which came to power in 2002 after renouncing its Islamist legacy, fulfill its promises of a democratic, liberal Turkey, and thereby become an example of moderation for Europeans, Americans and Muslims alike? Let's hope so. More importantly, let's work to make it so.

Soner Cagaptay, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the author of [Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk? \(/templateC04.php?CID=262\)](#) (Routledge, 2006). ❖

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