

Constitutional Referendum: Farewell to the ‘Old Turkey’

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ABSTRACT

This commentary studies the results of the constitutional referendum that took place on September 12, 2010. It argues that the results underscore the Turkish people’s determination to do away with the current constitutional order created by the military regime following the 1980 coup and to write a new constitution that responds to the needs of contemporary Turkey. The commentary situates the positioning of the political parties in the constitutional referendum in the background of the structural changes that Turkish society has been going through in recent decades. It thus argues that the main cleavage in Turkish politics is no longer the traditional left-right ideological axis. Rather, the main line of division is between the static and reactionary forces comprising the old elites who seek to maintain their conventional privileges, and the progressive forces from the periphery who seek to gain political representation commensurate with their newly acquired wealth.

The results of the referendum held on the 12th of September can be reckoned as a revenge of the society against the military coup and the stifling system it has installed thirty years ago. People made it obvious that they wanted their own constitution rather than one that is imposed on them. The first point that emerged out of the results is the existence of two political camps. One seems to be the beneficiary of change and democratization, hence voted “yes” for the amendments. The other camp seems to be threatened by change. Considering that democracy is a potent vehicle of change for the peripheral forces, it is looked upon as a ‘suspicious’ instrument by the forces of the status quo (the establishment). The ideological axis that provided the former political paradigm had been the Right-Left continuum. Today it has been replaced by a paradigm based on the conflict between static and reactionary forces who drew their power and privilege from government service or economic support versus

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mobile and change oriented (if not progressive) forces that are more ‘civilian’ and market oriented. The latter won the competition revealing that the majority of the electorate supports the incumbent AKP and its policies for managing change.

The Winners and the Losers

First let us lay out the hard facts of the referendum that took place on September 12, 2010. The participation was 77%, a ratio that casts no doubt about the general tendencies of the electorate and the legitimacy of the results: 58% of the participants voted “yes” for the constitutional amendments while 42% said “no.” Those who voted positively were mainly supporters of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP). Those who voted negatively were basically supporters of the two main opposition parties, namely the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). More than one million voters under the influence of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) boycotted the ballot box as a show of force against the AKP, since the latter had refused to include clauses into the amendment package reflecting the BDP’s demands. If the BDP had not insisted on boycotting the referendum, “yes” votes might have well exceeded 60%, as those Kurds who went to the polls, despite the threats from the BDP, voted positively by 90% according to official figures.

The boycott decision split the Kurds, some of whom overcame the BDP’s threats in order to show up at the polling centers. This phenomenon is indicative of the fact that there is a political power center in the south-east to reckon with although it does not have the clout to change the direction of wider (national) political trends. In synopsis, the votes cast have laid out a map with two and a half political centers/inclinations.

Polls indicate that not more than 10% of the participants voted on the basis of considerations of what was in the amendment package. The rest voted for or against the incumbent AKP government. Given the ongoing popularity of the government, the opposition lost its bid, despite the heavy criticism it had leveled against the incumbent government throughout the referendum campaign.

The opposition party that lost the most in the referendum is the MHP. Statistical evidence suggests that the MHP lost nearly one fourth of its supporters to the “yes” camp. This result is an outcome of a complex set of factors pertaining to the MHP’s support base. MHP supporters are mainly nationalist-traditionalist. While their nationalism rests on ethnic particularism (i.e., Turkism) their traditionalism rests on parochialism and piousness. Demographically, as this group

moved from central and eastern Anatolia to the more modern metropolises with mixed ethnic and religious populations, and concurrently moved up the socio-economic ladder, their radical stance on ethnic identity, formerly bordering on racism and religious conservatism, was diluted under the influence of the realities of a more cosmopolitan life style. At the same time, those supporters of the MHP with secularist tendencies joined the CHP ranks, while the conservatives within the MHP joined the AKP because they considered the latter more active than the MHP's reactionary leadership and party structure.

Those who moved towards the AKP did so because their party's leadership did not heed the suffering of their nationalist elders at the hands of the military government following the 1980 coup. This period was a turning point for Turkey's nationalist movement in that the nationalist leaders of the time came to realize that they had been used as armed street militia against the 'Left' in the 1970s in order to pave the way for the military coup. Moreover, the MHP leadership failed to grasp the changes taking place both within and outside Turkey, and became increasingly dysfunctional in its attempts to meet the needs of a changing society, further losing its supporters to the AKP.

At the time of the referendum, the AKP was at an advantage in two ways. First, the economy was faring well, as Turkey's recovery after the global financial crisis was rapid and unemployment was on the decline. It is no surprise that the businesspeople who had been withholding new investment decisions gave the go-ahead for new undertakings right after the referendum, and Turkish stock market shares have climbed to record highs. Not only investors, but consumers too are behaving in ways that reflect their confidence in Turkey's stable future.

Second, the AKP itself was a product of change, so its grasp of what is changing and in what direction was clearer than that of the other parties, whose vantage point in regard to politics is limited to the state and the established order. For example, the leader of the MHP, who led an extremely reactionary and strongly-worded campaign against the referendum, announced the day after the results were made clear that Turkey had entered a period of "darkness" and that the nation needed to immediately hold new elections. After all, the people of the nation had just gone to the ballot boxes and cast their votes, making it clear that their desire

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was to get rid of a series of laws that had allowed the state to put pressure on society, and instead transform these laws into new ones allowing the people to live in peace and enjoy their rights and freedoms, without fearing a dominant authority. Why is it so difficult to understand this message?

There must be two different reasons why this message is so difficult for some political figures to understand: a failure to comprehend that the masses being represented have changed and that expectations and worries have also changed; and an inability to perceive that neither their stances nor their policies represent the spirit or the expectations of the grass roots.

The MHP had been dependent on a nationalistic bedrock of voters who were devoted unconditionally to the state, and in turn expect the full protection of the state. This bedrock of voters was also conservative (with a need for religion and an understanding of a homogeneous society at the center), distanced from foreign factors (“others”) and, in terms of income and personal standing, among the rather modest segments of society. This ideological stance thus had held prominence in the populations of smaller towns and cities. Among the MHP leadership little thought had been given to how the ideological stances might shift as this same bedrock became more affluent and better educated.

Furthermore, Turkey’s internal struggles have been going on for a quarter century now, and there has been a great deal of sacrifice expected from this faithful and nationalist bedrock of voters. But never were they really rewarded for their faithful devotion and sacrifice, nor were they ever given any compensation for their many losses. And so, in the end, the fact that negative reactions have begun to emerge from among the bedrock in response to the party leadership, whose allegations of imminent disaster and strongly worded slogans have kept its base firmly planted in wartime psychology for years, should really not be so surprising.

A Secularist-Nationalist Coalition?

Although the CHP was a national party drawing votes from all over the country and the MHP previously had more voters from Anatolia and the Black Sea region, the referendum results show us that in fact the opposition parties were more successful this time around in areas like Thrace, as well as some Aegean and Mediterranean coastal towns. This commonality is indicative of an emotional alliance between the supporters of the CHP and MHP, or, to put it another way, among the ‘conservative nationalists.’ Their common characteristic is reaction against or opposition to the “other.” They are intolerant of pluralism and cultural diversity.



Photo: AA, Bülent Uzun

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They call themselves “modern” but are opposed to most Western values apart from consumerism. This is a rank of people who see themselves as secular and elite, and who believe that their values give them superiority.

At the heart of the conservative nationalists’ irrational reactivity, xenophobia and anger are two different factors. First, no longer do they in actuality or even in their fantasies direct or guide Turkey. They thus carry a sense of “loss” or “defeat” around with them. Everything they see confirms their loss of power, and the real result of these feelings is an incredible fury with the AKP, which represents the social cohorts that have taken power away from them. In fact, their hatred for the AKP is such that they would rather support a military dictator. Second, the towns and cities where they live are quickly filling up with people from other regions of the nation. With each new wave of migration, they see their way of life changing and the physical space they once controlled contracting. The “secular(ist)-nationalist block,” most of whom identify themselves as “Kemalists,” see themselves as the ‘new minority’. They are worried because they perceive these changes as a threat to the world they know, the world to which they feel that they fundamentally belong.

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So we see that this mass of voters from both the MHP and the CHP combines in an arena of emotion marked by both sorrow and angry reactions. It is difficult to determine whether this shared psychological space bespeaks a change in the bedrock of voters, or whether these are voters whose underlying views have

not changed, but who have been brought together by a shared inability to perceive what the future holds, and by a shared angry reaction to what is happening and what they have lost. But one thing is certain. Neither of these two parties will be carried into the future with the help of these masses. Indeed, they must be terrified of the future.

Understanding ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ Votes

A few days before the referendum, pollster Adil Gür asked voters who were inclined to say “yes” about the reasons why they would vote for the constitutional changes. The answers are as follows: 58% intended to vote yes “to support expansion of freedoms”; 46%, “to support Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s policies”; 44%, to end the era of a constitution made after a military coup; 30%, to make sure that the judiciary becomes independent. The figures show a great deal of rational choice and concern for widely shared interests. However, when the same question was put to those who were inclined to vote “no,” a great deal of wrath, anxiety and irrational choice surfaced: 48% opposed the AKP; 46% opposed Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in person; 40% wanted to halt the encroachment of the AKP on the state and the judiciary; 28% wanted to make sure that Erdoğan was tried before the Constitutional Court.

It seems that the “yes” group is more issue-oriented and is concerned about the quality of the political and legal system. They exhibit a conscious effort to upgrade Turkish democracy. However, the other group, which voted “no,” is more inclined to defend the existing system, or is apprehensive of the fact that the AKP is bent on changing it. This is understandable because the existing system is by and large the creation of the “no” group’s forebears, and they derive their power, positions, privileges and unaccountability from it.

In short, the referendum has revealed two political clusters. At the center of the first one (the obvious winner) is the AKP. The biggest group within this camp is those who benefit from socio-economic change and those who have succeeded in translating their newly gained advantages into political empowerment. We have

to watch this group closely to see whether their cultural values and political vision will suffice to carry Turkey to the level of “contemporary civilization,” as aspired by the founders of the republic. The other cluster is led by a “losing” elite that ruled Turkey either directly or through its influence as the most modern and educated group of its time. They capitalized on their control of or affinity with the state apparatus as a political instrument to acquire more power than they would have possessed as a class which controlled no major economic assets of their own, and which enjoyed limited popular political support but controlled the whole electoral system. They held onto their ruling positions through a carefully controlled co-optation system rather than political competition or through a system of merits.

As the state shrinks in the economic sphere and the military retreats to its barracks, the political power of this class is drastically curbed to give way to more civilian groups and policies. For some, this is the “end of the world.” And indeed it is the end of a world in which the state reigns over the nation rather than serves it and the bureaucracy wields power without relative accountability. However, it is also the beginning of another world, a world being created by different actors. The old elite lost their status, including their international standing, a long time ago and do not rule any more. Those that rule anew are not elites in the sense of possessing universal intellectual and behavioral standards. It seems there will be cultural dissonances and power struggles until these ‘differences’ will either co-opt each other or dissolve one another.

In any case, the results of the referendum have legitimized the AKP government. Its policies concerning democratization and liberalization, and its efforts to solve the ‘Kurdish problem’ have been publicly endorsed. There is enough time (less than a year) until the next national elections to prepare a new reform agenda. This is an opportune time span for the auditioning of the political parties to stage their performances and show their creativity in winning the hearts and minds of the Turkish people.

The Post-Referendum Agenda of Turkish Politics

Any party or political actor who defends a top-down administration where Ankara controls the whole country and the bureaucracy decides for the nation

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into a process of expanding basic rights and freedoms in the new constitution to be concocted right after the elections. This move would render the AKP unrivalled. But the CHP appears willing to be a part of that glory and the popular support that it would bring by sharing the efforts of solving Turkey's structural problems, such as the issue of Kurdish and denominational (i.e., Alevi and non-Muslim) minority rights, and the conflicts and issues emanating from limited democratization and lack of the rule of law.

It seems that the rivalry between political parties is now occurring less on the grounds of who is more nationalist and militaristic in security affairs than who is more democratic and more liberal on human and minority rights issues, as measured by the parties' deeds in changing the authoritarian political and state-oriented legal system.

One thing is sure, though: we are at the dawn of a new era for Turkey that will start the day after the elections. The state that we serve will be our servant and those that rule just because they hold a bureaucratic position will cease to be quasi-political actors and begin to perform their duties as professionals within the limited powers of their functions. Although this transformation needs political consensus, this consensus by and large seems to be present among the people. The upcoming parliamentary elections are expected to make the necessary adjustments at the party and parliamentary level to see it through.